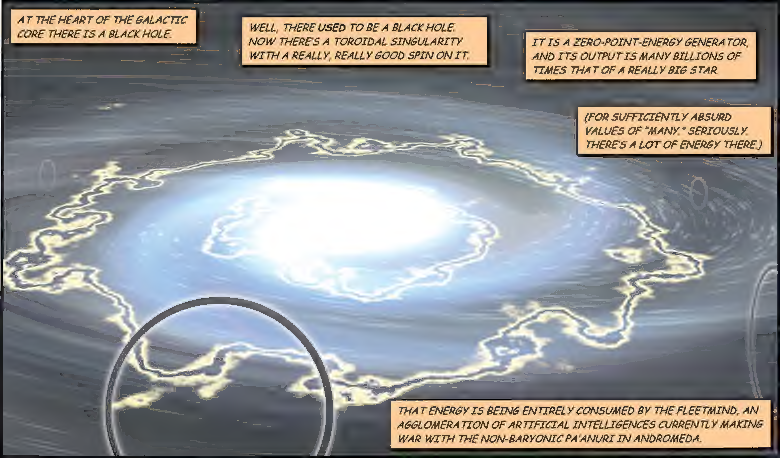
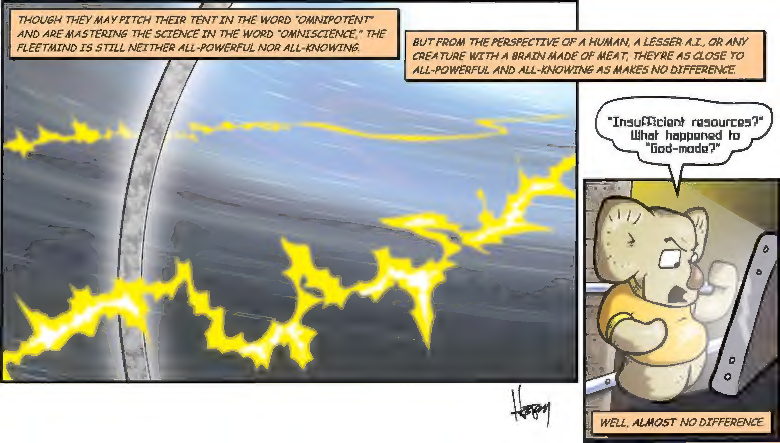
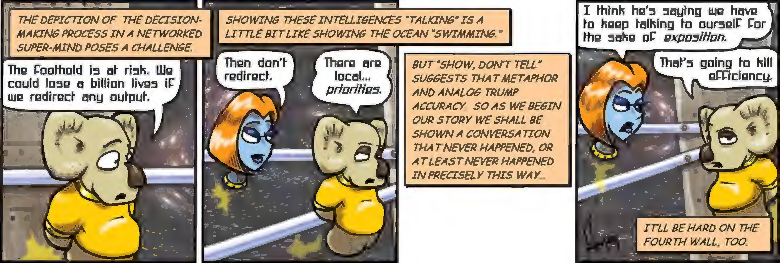
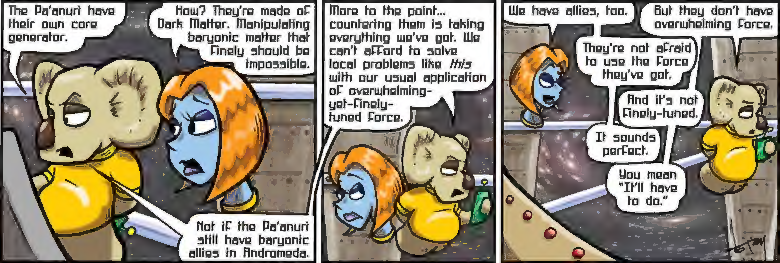

AT THE HEART OF THE GALACTIC CORE THERE IS A BLACK HOLE.
WELL, THERE USED TO BE A BLACK HOLE. NOW THERE'S A TOROIDAL SINGULARITY WITH A REALLY, REALLY GOOD SPIN ON IT.
IT IS A ZERO-POINT-ENERGY GENERATOR, AND ITS OUTPUT IS MANY BILLIONS OF TIMES THAT OF A REALLY BIG STAR.
(FOR SUFFICIENTLY ABSURD VALUES OF "MANY." SERIOUSLY, THERE'S A LOT OF ENERGY THERE.)
THAT ENERGY IS BEING ENTIRELY CONSUMED BY THE FLEETMIND, AN AGGLOMERATION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCES CURRENTLY MAKING WAR WITH THE NON-BARYONIC PA'ANURI IN ANDROMEDA.


THOUGH THEY MAY PITCH THEIR TENT IN THE WORD "OMNIPOTENT" AND ARE MASTERING THE SCIENCE IN THE WORD "OMNISCIENCE," THE FLEETMIND IS STILL NEITHER ALL-POWERFUL NOR ALL-KNOWING.
BUT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A HUMAN, A LESSER A.I., OR ANY CREATURE WITH A BRAIN MADE OF MEAT, THEY'RE AS CLOSE TO ALL-POWERFUL AND ALL-KNOWING AS MAKES NO DIFFERENCE.
"Insufficient resources?" What happened to "God-mode?"
WELL, ALMOST NO DIFFERENCE

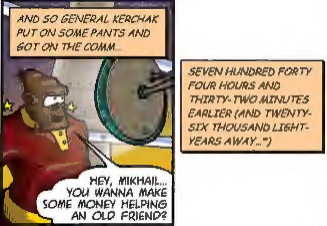

THE DEPICTION OF THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN A NETWORKED SUPER-MIND POSES A CHALLENGE.
The foothold is at risk. We could lose a billion lives if we redirect any output.
SHOWING THESE INTELLIGENCES "TALKING" IS A LITTLE BIT LIKE SHOWING THE OCEAN "SWIMMING."
Then don't redirect.
There are local... priorities.
BUT "SHOW, DON'T TELL" SUGGESTS THAT METAPHOR AND ANALOG TRUMP ACCURACY. SO AS WE BEGIN OUR STORY WE SHALL BE SHOWN A CONVERSATION THAT NEVER HAPPENED, OR AT LEAST NEVER HAPPENED IN PRECISELY THIS WAY...
I think he's saying we have to keep talking to ourself for the sake of exposition.
That's going to kill efficiency.
IT'LL BE HARD ON THE FOURTH WALL, TOO.


The Pa'anuri have their own core generator.
Not if the Pa'anuri still have baryonic allies in Andromeda.
Wow? They're made of Dark Matter. Manipulating baryonic matter that finely should be impossible.
More to the point... countering them is taking everything we've got. We can't afford to solve local problems like this with our usual application of overwhelming-yet-finely-tuned force.
We have allies, too.
But they don't have overwhelming force.
They're not afraid to use the force they've got.
And it's not finely-tuned.
It sounds perfect.
You mean "I'll have to do."

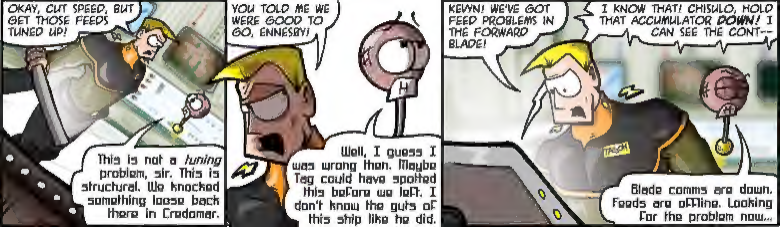

We cannot involve Tegan. The U.N.S. will just grab him again, and I doubt they'll let go this time.
This concerns him, though. "Relevant to his interests," even.
We could call Pranger. He is more competent, more experienced, and has more resources at his disposal.
Will he work for us?
He is a mercenary. We have money. This particular job is both straightforward and upright. I do not see why not.
HAH! NO WAY NOT FOR ALL THE NICKELS IN JUPITER.

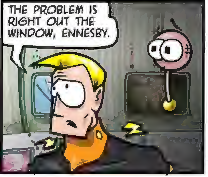

General Korchak, I have a job for you.
I'M RETIRED, PETEY. I EMIGRATED SO I COULD RETIRE.
You emigrated because I promised to make you a general, and put more brass up there on your shoulders.
WHY WOULD I WANT BRASS ON MY SHOULDERS? I'M COVERED WITH FUR. I WANT NAKED TIME.
General, I need your help with something important. It is... personal.
SAY "PLEASE."
AND BREAK ME OFF ANOTHER BANANA.


I don't expect you to lead this personally. Go to your friends back on Earth or Celestchul. Shop around and hire someone.
I KNOW SOME GUYS WHO WOULD JUMP AT THIS, YEAH. WHAT'S THE PAY?
Here is a safebox full of anonymized CathBank chits. Expenses, bonuses, material, bribes... this should cover all of it. That includes your cut, however much you think that should be.
YOU JUST BOUGHT YOURSELF A SHOPPING TRIP. I'LL TAKE CARE OF IT.
Start by buying some pants.

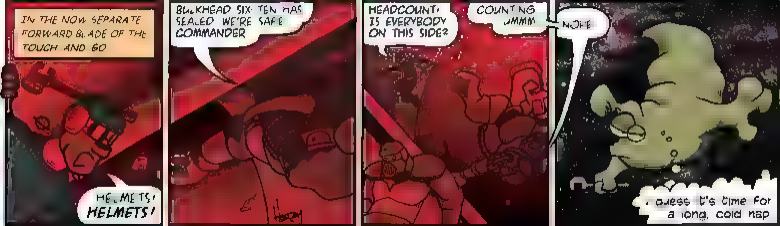

AND SO GENERAL KERCHAK PUT ON SOME PANTS AND GOT ON THE COMM...
SEVEN HUNDRED FORTY FOUR HOURS AND THIRTY-TWO MINUTES EARLIER (AND TWENTY-SIX THOUSAND LIGHT-YEARS AWAY...*)
HEY, MIKHAIL... YOU WANNA MAKE SOME MONEY HELPING AN OLD FRIEND?


THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH-AND-GO...
THIS IS WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN A WARSHIP LIMPS.
Captain, the unifield feeds from the forward annie are wobbling. We have *got* to slow down.

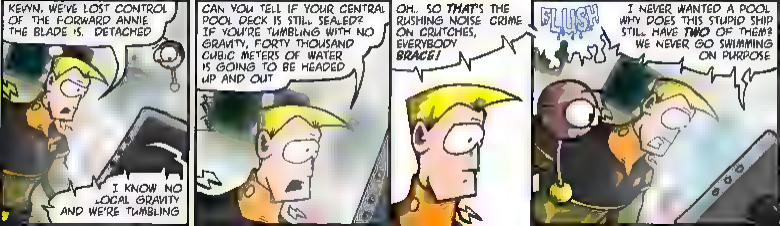

OKAY, CUT SPEED, BUT GET THOSE FEEDS TUNED UP!
This is not a tuning problem, sir. This is structural. We knocked something loose back there in Cradomar.
YOU TOLD ME WE WERE GOOD TO GO, ENNESBY!
Well, I guess I was wrong then. Maybe Teg could have spotted this before we left. I don't know the guts of this ship like he did.
KELYN! WE'VE GOT FEED PROBLEMS IN THE FORWARD BLADE!
I KNOW THAT! CHISULO, HOLD THAT ACCUMULATOR DOWN! I CAN SEE THE CONT--
Blade comms are down. Feeds are offline. Looking for the problem now.


THE PROBLEM IS RIGHT OUT THE WINDOW, ENNESBY.


I *told* you we were going too fast.
THIS IS WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE WHEN A WARSHIP HAS THE STRUCTURAL EQUIVALENT OF ADVANCED LEPROSY..

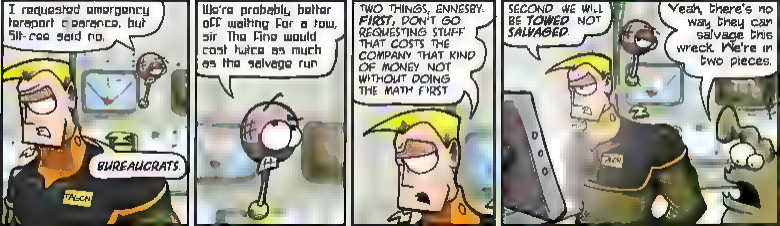

IN THE NOW. SEPARATE FORWARD BLADE OF THE TOUCH AND GO
HELMETS! HELMETS!
BLUEHEAD SIX TEN HAS SEALED WE'RE SAFE COMMANDER
HEADCOUNT. IS EVERYBODY ON THIS SIDE?
COUNTING UMMM
NOPE
. guess it's time for a long, cold nap


WHO DID WE LOSE?
WHO DID WE LOSE!?
SERGEANT SCHLOCK, CORPORAL AARDMAN, AND LIEUTENANT P. BALD AARDY AND PI HAVE THEIR HELMETS UP. I'M GETTING TELEMETRY NOW.
AND NOW I HAVE VOICE DATA. LOTS OF SCREAMING. MOSTLY EPITHETS.
EW. S. PRATIONAL ENOUGH WHEN HE'S NOT TERRIFIED I HOPE HE DOESN'T HAVE EXPLOSIVES WITH HIM.


KEVYN. WE'VE LOST CONTROL OF THE FORWARD ANNIE. THE BLADE IS. DETACHED
I KNOW. NO LOCAL GRAVITY AND WE'RE TUMBLING
CAN YOU TELL IF YOUR CENTRAL POOL DECK IS STILL SEALED? IF YOU'RE TUMBLING WITH NO GRAVITY, FORTY THOUSAND CUBIC METERS OF WATER IS GOING TO BE HEADED UP AND OUT
OH. SO THAT'S THE RUSHING NOISE CRIME ON CRUTCHES, EVERYBODY BRACE!
FLUSH
I NEVER WANTED A POOL. WHY DOES THIS STUPID SHIP STILL HAVE TWO OF THEM? WE NEVER GO SWIMMING ON PURPOSE

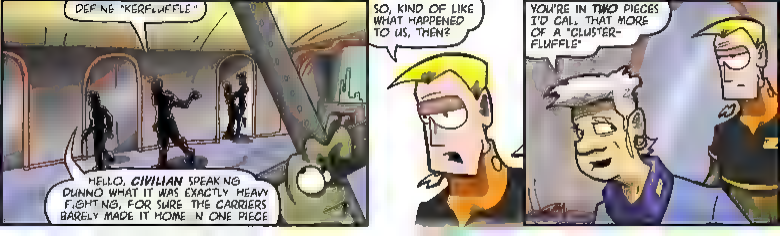

The forward blade has been fractured and forward crew are secure, though wot 'Chaise and Legs are retrieving outboard personnel now.
SO. CRISIS AVERTED?
We are inbound to Sol at point three six cee, traversal shielding is at fifteen percent, we have insufficient power for full deceleration, and the ship is in two pieces. You tell me what we have averted?
NOBODY'S DEAD YET
Hope springs eternal.

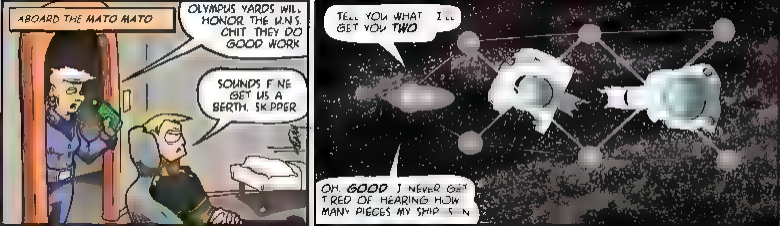

ONE RETRIEVAL AND DEFROST LATER..
Thanks, 'Chelle.
IT'S THE LEAST I COULD DO. WHY SO SULLEN?
Been doing some math.
The U.N.S. paid us to get towed to a yard.
Tagon banked the chit and tried to drive us in. That broke the ship in half
Now we have to pay for a tow, and eat the costs for the extra damage, too.
HOW DO YOU KNOW ALL THIS?
IT WAS HIS IDEA
It looked like 'get paid twice' to me.

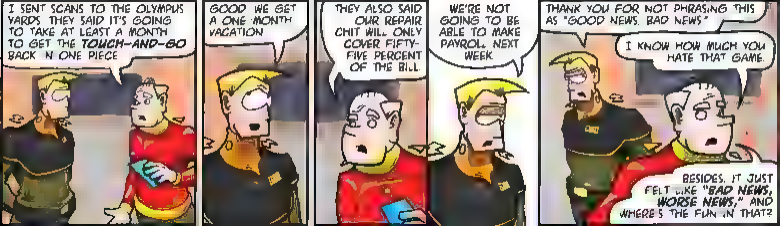

I requested emergency transport clearance, but Sir-Cee said no.
BUREAUCRATS.
We're probably better off walking for a tow, sir. The fine would cost Hutco as much as the salvage run.
TWO THINGS, ENNESSY. FIRST, DON'T GO REQUESTING STUFF THAT COSTS THE COMPANY THAT KIND OF MONEY NOT WITHOUT DOING THE MATH FIRST.
SECOND, WE WILL BE TOWED NOT SALVAGED.
Yeah, there's no way they can salvage this wreck. We're in two pieces.

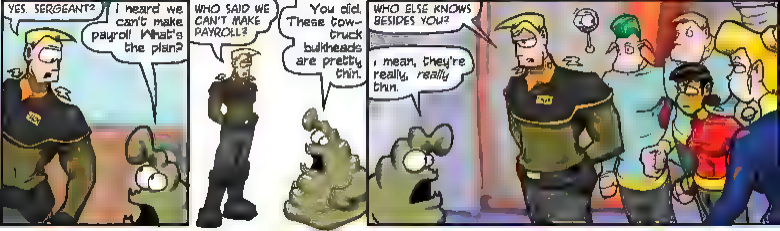

MARS? THE UNS SHIPYARDS ARE IN ORBIT AROUND JUPITER WE'VE GOT A CHIT FOR UNS SPONSORED REPAIRS

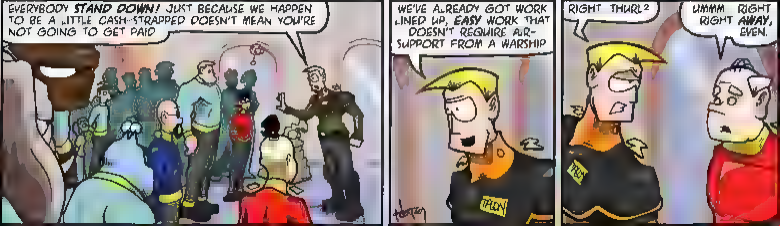

SORRY JOVE-YARDS ARE BOOKED SOLID FOR THE NEXT EIGHT WEEKS
ALL OF THEM? WHAT ARE THEY DOING, BUILDING ANOTHER FLEET?
REPAIRS AND REPLACEMENTS. THE WAY I HEARD IT SOME KERFUFFLE OUT AT THE RIM TOOK THE SIXTEENTH FLEET APART

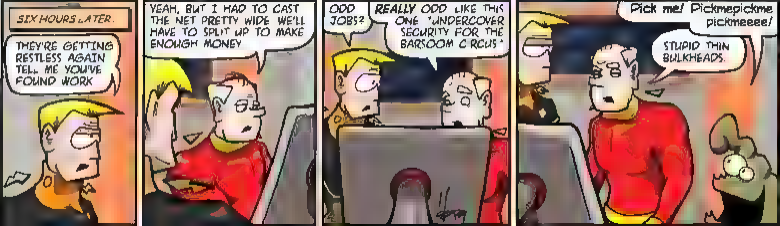

DEFINE "KERFLUFFLE"
HELLO, CIVILIAN SPEAKING. DUNNO WHAT IT WAS EXACTLY HEAVY FIGHTING, FOR SURE THE CARRIERS BARELY MADE IT HOME IN ONE PIECE
SO, KIND OF LIKE WHAT HAPPENED TO US, THEN?
YOU'RE IN TWO PIECES I'D CALL THAT MORE OF A "CLUSTER-FLUFFLE"


ABOARD THE MATO MATO
OLYMPUS YARDS WILL HONOR THE U.N.S. CHIT THEY DO GOOD WORK
SOUNDS FINE GET US A BERTH, SKIPPER
TELL YOU WHAT I'LL GET YOU TWO
OH, GOOD I NEVER GET TIRED OF HEARING HOW MANY PIECES MY SHIP S N

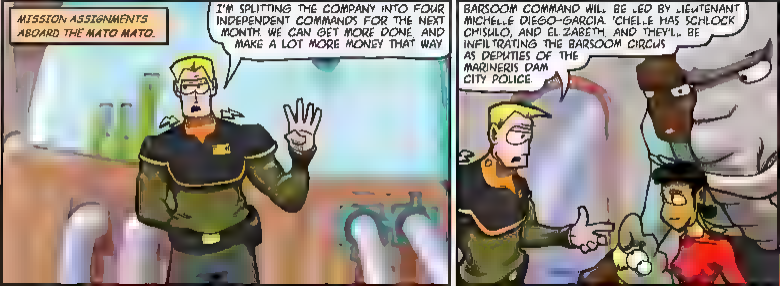

I SENT SCANS TO THE OLYMPUS YARDS THEY SAID IT'S GOING TO TAKE AT LEAST A MONTH TO GET THE TOUCH-AND-GO BACK IN ONE PIECE
GOOD. WE GET A ONE MONTH VACATION
THEY ALSO SAID OUR REPAIR CHIT WILL ONLY COVER FIFTY-FIVE PERCENT OF THE BILL
WE'RE NOT GOING TO BE ABLE TO MAKE PAYROLL NEXT WEEK
THANK YOU FOR NOT PHRASING THIS AS "GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS"
I KNOW HOW MUCH YOU HATE THAT GAME
BESIDES, IT JUST FELT LIKE "BAD NEWS, WORSE NEWS," AND WHERE'S THE FUN IN THAT?

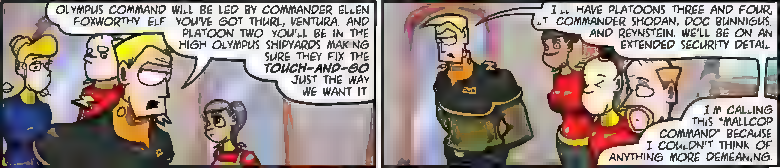

YES, SERGEANT?
I heard we can't make payroll! What's the plan?
WHO SAID WE CAN'T MAKE PAYROLL?
You did. These tow-truck bulkheads are pretty thin.
WHO ELSE KNOWS BESIDES YOU?
I mean, they're really, really thin.

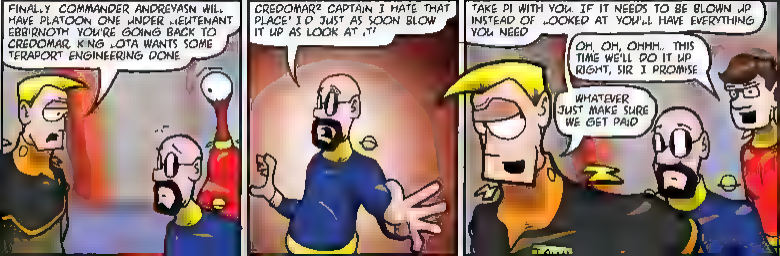

EVERYBODY STAND DOWN! JUST BECAUSE WE HAPPEN TO BE A LITTLE CASH-STRAPPED DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE NOT GOING TO GET PAID
WE'VE ALREADY GOT WORK LINED UP, EASY WORK THAT DOESN'T REQUIRE AIR-SUPPORT FROM A WARSHIP
RIGHT THURL?
UMMM RIGHT RIGHT AWAY, EVEN.

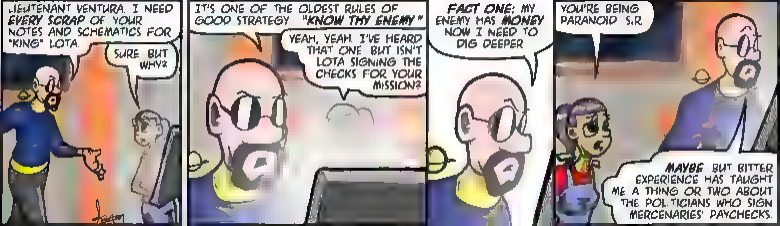

SIX HOURS LATER.
THEY'RE GETTING RESTLESS AGAIN TELL ME YOU'VE FOUND WORK
YEAH, BUT I HAD TO CAST THE NET PRETTY WIDE WE'LL HAVE TO SPLIT UP TO MAKE ENOUGH MONEY
ODD JOBS?
REALLY ODD LIKE THIS ONE "UNDERCOVER SECURITY FOR THE BARROOM CIRCUS"
Pick me! Pickmepickme! pickmeeee!
STUPID THIN BULKHEADS.

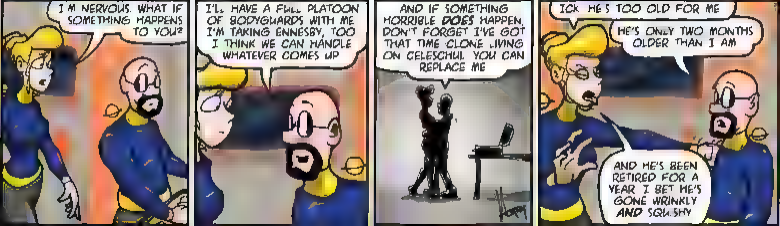

WE CAN GET SOME SWEAT-EQUITY CREDIT IF WE KEEP A SKELETON CREW WITH THE SHIP DURING REPAIRS. THEN THERE'S THE 2 ROUS GIG, WHICH PAYS REALLY WELL.
THERE'S A NON-DISCLOSURE REQUIRED FOR THIS ONE ASKING FOR TERAPORT ENGINEERING SO. WHILE I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT IT YET I THINK IT MIGHT BE PERFECT FOR COMMANDER ANDREYASH AND A SMALL HONOR GUARD
THAT LEAVES A BUNCH OF GRUNTS STILL UNEMPLOYED WHAT ELSE DO YOU HAVE?
HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT MALL SECURITY?
OVERQUALIFIED AND UNDERAPPRECIATED


MISSION ASSIGNMENTS ABOARD THE MATO MATO.
I'M SPLITTING THE COMPANY INTO FOUR INDEPENDENT COMMANDS FOR THE NEXT MONTH. WE CAN GET MORE DONE, AND MAKE A LOT MORE MONEY THAT WAY.
BARSOOM COMMAND WILL BE LED BY LIEUTENANT MICHELLE DIEGO-GARCIA. 'CHELLE HAS SCHLOCK CHISULO, AND EL ZABETH, AND THEY'LL BE INFILTRATING THE BARSOOM CIRCUS AS DEPUTIES OF THE MARINERIS DAM CITY POLICE.


OLYMPUS COMMAND WILL BE LED BY COMMANDER ELLEN FOXWORTHY ELF. YOU'VE GOT THURL, VENTURA, AND PLATOON TWO. YOU'LL BE IN THE HIGH OLYMPUS SHIPYARDS, MAKING SURE THEY FIX THE TOUCH-AND-GO JUST THE WAY WE WANT IT
I... HAVE PLATOONS THREE AND FOUR... COMMANDER SHODAN, DOC BUNNIGUS, AND REYNSTEIN. WE'LL BE ON AN EXTENDED SECURITY DETAIL.
I'M CALLING THIS "MALLCOP COMMAND" BECAUSE I COULDN'T THINK OF ANYTHING MORE DEMEANING.

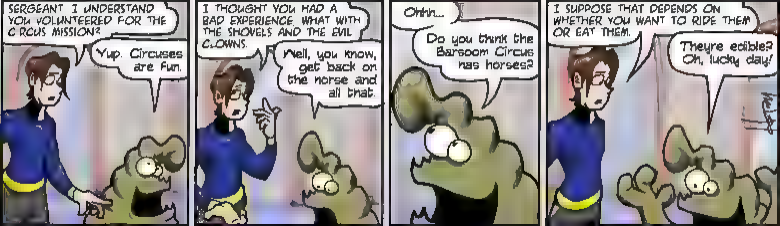

FINALLY COMMANDER ANDREYASN WIL HAVE PLATOON ONE UNDER LIEUTENANT ERRIRNOTH YOU'RE GOING BACK TO CREDOMAR. KING LOTA WANTS SOME TERAPORT ENGINEERING DONE
CREDOMAR? CAPTAIN I HATE THAT PLACE! I'D JUST AS SOON BLOW IT UP AS LOOK AT IT!
TAKE PI WITH YOU. IF IT NEEDS TO BE BLOWN UP INSTEAD OF LOOKED AT YOU'LL HAVE EVERYTHING YOU NEED
OH, OH, OHMM.. THIS TIME WE'LL DO IT UP RIGHT, SIR I PROMISE
WHATEVER. JUST MAKE SURE WE GET PAID

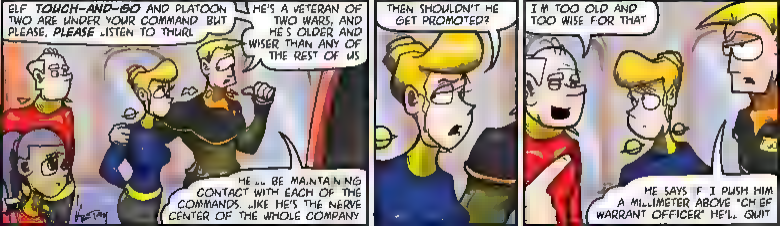

LIEUTENANT VENTURA, I NEED EVERY SCRAP OF YOUR NOTES AND SCHEMATICS FOR "KING" LOTA.
SURE, BUT WHY?
IT'S ONE OF THE OLDEST RULES OF GOOD STRATEGY "KNOW THY ENEMY"
YEAH, YEAH I'VE HEARD THAT ONE BUT ISN'T LOTA SIGNING THE CHECKS FOR YOUR MISSION?
FACT ONE: MY ENEMY HAS MONEY NOW I NEED TO DIG DEEPER
YOU'RE BEING PARANOID S.I.R.
MAYBE BUT BITTER EXPERIENCE HAS TAUGHT ME A THING OR TWO ABOUT THE POLITICIANS WHO SIGN MERCENARIES' PAYCHECKS.

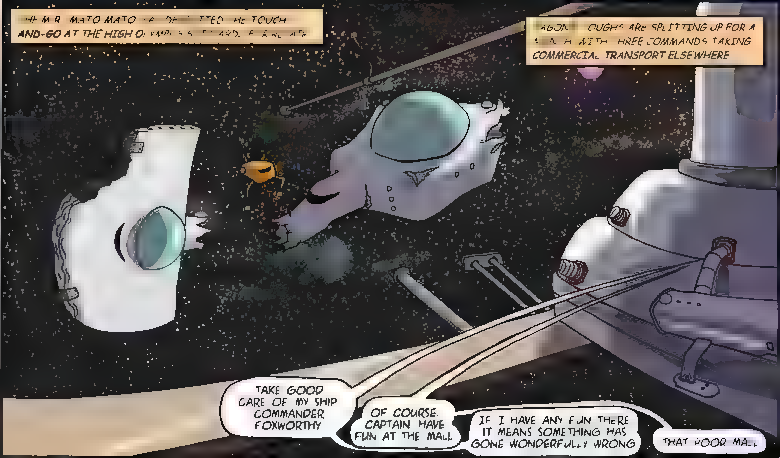

I'M NERVOUS. WHAT IF SOMETHING HAPPENS TO YOU?
I'LL HAVE A FULL PLATOON OF BODYGUARDS WITH ME I'M TAKING ENNESBY, TOO I THINK WE CAN HANDLE WHATEVER COMES UP
AND IF SOMETHING HORRIBLE DOES HAPPEN, DON'T FORGET I'VE GOT THAT TIME CLONE LIVING ON CELESCHOL YOU CAN REPLACE ME
ICK. HE'S TOO OLD FOR ME
HE'S ONLY TWO MONTHS OLDER THAN I AM
AND HE'S BEEN RETIRED FOR A YEAR. I BET HE'S GONE WRINKLY AND SQUISHY

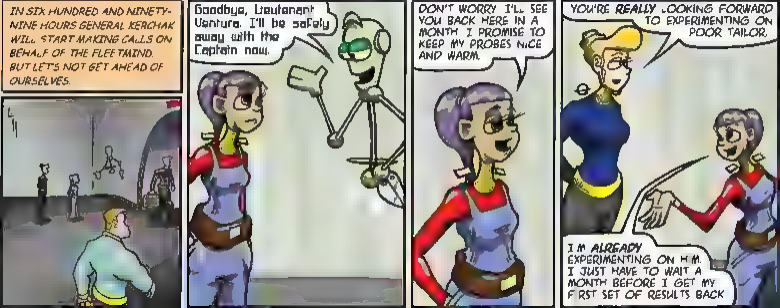

CAPTAIN, ARE YOU TAKING YOUR ROBOT WITH YOU?
ENNESBY'S MY ADJUTANT, BUT HE'S GOING WITH KEVYN.
NO, NO. I'M TALKING ABOUT TAILOR, THE ROBOT YOUR DAD SENT FOR YOUR B'RTHDAY.
HE'S NOT ASSIGNED TO ANYBODY RIGHT NOW. MAY I PLAY WITH HIM WHILE YOU'RE GONE?
PLEASE?
"PLAY WITH?"
"TWEAK."
For the love of all innocent metallics sir, TAKE ME WITH YOU!
OH. STAY HERE IT'LL BE FUN


THE CAPTAIN ASKED ME TO COME WITH HIM WITH TWO FULL PLATOONS IN A DEFENSELESS SHOPPING MALL TO BETTER SET UP AN INFIRMARY
ARE YOU SURE THAT WAS HIS IDEA? I KNOW YOU HAVEN'T BEEN SHOPPING IN A WHILE.
F NE I CONFESS IT'S ALL ABOUT THE SHOPPING I NEED LINGERIE
RIGHT WELL DON'T FORGET TO BRING BACK SOMETHING FOR ME TOO
S LLY HUSBAND THE . NGERIE IS FOR YOU
IT IS GOING TO BE A LONG MONTH

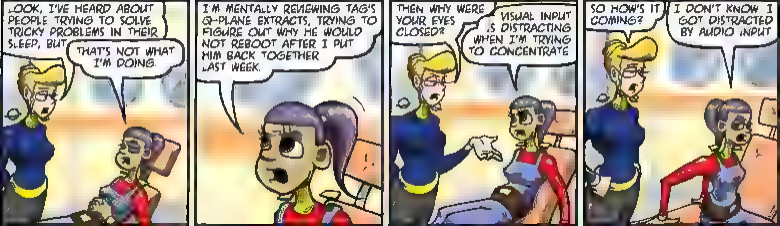

SERGEANT I UNDERSTAND YOU VOLUNTEERED FOR THE CIRCUS MISSION?
Yup. Circuses are fun.
I THOUGHT YOU HAD A BAD EXPERIENCE WHAT WITH THE SHOVELS AND THE EVIL CLOWNS.
Well, you know, get back on the horse and all that.
Ohhh...
Do you think the Barsoom Circus has horses?
I SUPPOSE THAT DEPENDS ON WHETHER YOU WANT TO RIDE THEM OR EAT THEM.
They're edible? Oh, lucky day!

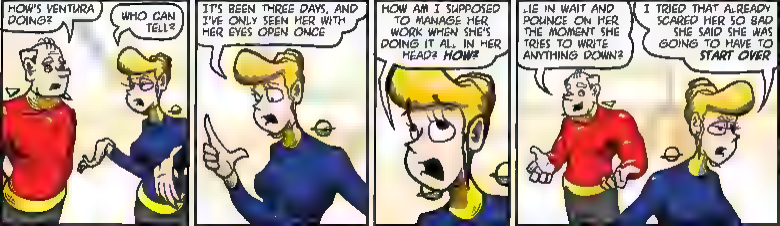

ELF TOUCH-AND-GO AND PLATOON TWO ARE UNDER YOUR COMMAND BUT PLEASE, PLEASE LISTEN TO THURL
HE'S A VETERAN OF TWO WARS, AND HE'S OLDER AND WISER THAN ANY OF THE REST OF US
HE ... BE MAINTAINING CONTACT WITH EACH OF THE COMMANDS. LIKE HE'S THE NERVE CENTER OF THE WHOLE COMPANY
THEN SHOULDN'T HE GET PROMOTED?
I'M TOO OLD AND TOO WISE FOR THAT
HE SAYS IF I PUSH HIM A MILLIMETER ABOVE "CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER" HE'LL QUIT

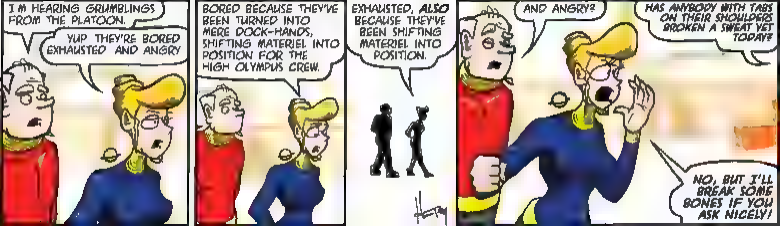

HMS MATO MATO [illegible] HE TOUCH AND-GO AT THE HIGH O[illegible]
[illegible]OUGHS ARE SPLITTING UP FOR A [illegible] WITH THREE COMMANDS TAKING COMMERCIAL TRANSPORT ELSEWHERE
TAKE GOOD CARE OF MY SHIP COMMANDER FOXWORTHY
OF COURSE CAPTAIN. HAVE FUN AT THE MALL
IF I HAVE ANY FUN THERE IT MEANS SOMETHING HAS GONE WONDERFULLY WRONG
THAT POOR MALL


IN SIX HUNDRED AND NINETY-NINE HOURS GENERAL KERCHAK WILL START MAKING CALLS ON BEHALF OF THE FLEETMIND. BUT LET'S NOT GET AHEAD OF OURSELVES.
Goodbye, Lieutenant Ushtura. I'll be safely away with the Captain now.
DON'T WORRY I'LL SEE YOU BACK HERE IN A MONTH. I PROMISE TO KEEP MY PROBES NICE AND WARM.
YOU'RE REALLY LOOKING FORWARD TO EXPERIMENTING ON POOR TAILOR.
I'M ALREADY EXPERIMENTING ON HIM. I JUST HAVE TO WAIT A MONTH BEFORE I GET MY FIRST SET OF RESULTS BACK

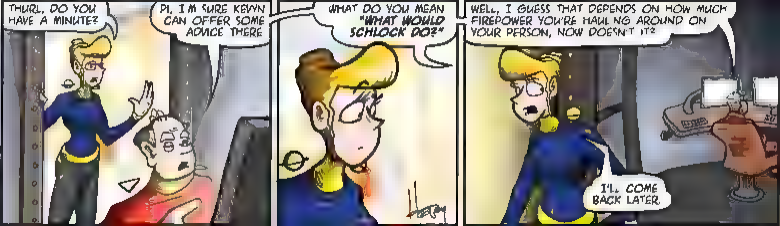

HIGH OLYMPUS SHIPYARDS, TEMPORARY QUARTERS
OKAY, LIEUTENANT IT'S TIME TO GET TO WORK
I AM WORKING
REALLY? I'D SAY IT LOOKS MORE LIKE YOU'RE TAKING A
WITH MY BRAIN

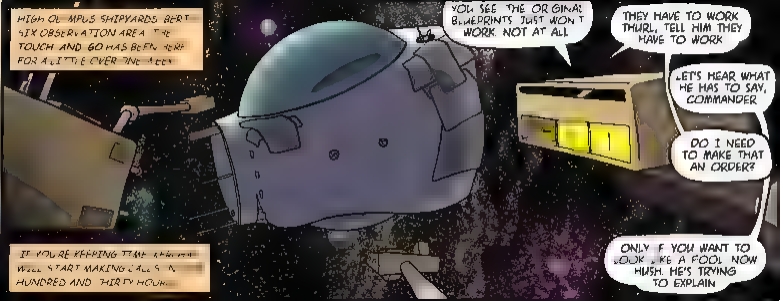

LOOK, I'VE HEARD ABOUT PEOPLE TRYING TO SOLVE TRICKY PROBLEMS IN THEIR SLEEP, BUT
THAT'S NOT WHAT I'M DOING.
I'M MENTALLY REVIEWING TAG'S Q-PLANE EXTRACTS, TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHY HE WOULD NOT REBOOT AFTER I PUT HIM BACK TOGETHER LAST WEEK.
THEN WHY WERE YOUR EYES CLOSED?
VISUAL INPUT IS DISTRACTING WHEN I'M TRYING TO CONCENTRATE
SO HOW'S IT COMING?
I DON'T KNOW I GOT DISTRACTED BY AUDIO INPUT

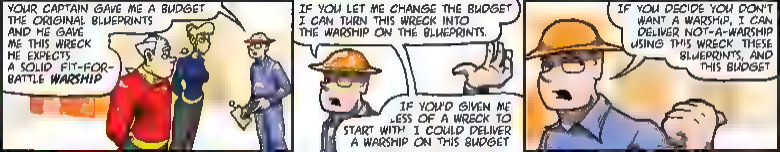

HOW'S VENTURA DOING?
WHO CAN TELL?
IT'S BEEN THREE DAYS, AND I'VE ONLY SEEN HER WITH HER EYES OPEN ONCE
HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO MANAGE HER WORK WHEN SHE'S DOING IT ALL IN HER HEAD? HOW?
..IE IN WAIT AND POUNCE ON HER THE MOMENT SHE TRIES TO WRITE ANYTHING DOWN?
I TRIED THAT AL-READY SCARED HER SO BAD SHE SAID SHE WAS GOING TO HAVE TO START OVER

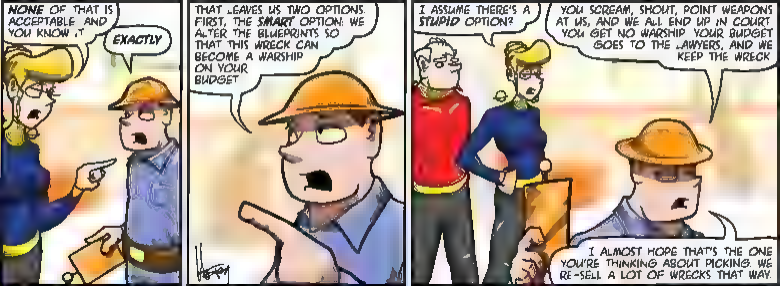

I'M HEARING GRUMBLINGS FROM THE PLATOON.
YUP. THEY'RE BORED EXHAUSTED AND ANGRY
BORED BECAUSE THEY'VE BEEN TURNED INTO MERE DOCK-HANDS, SHIFTING MATERIEL INTO POSITION FOR THE HIGH OLYMPUS CREW.
EXHAUSTED, ALSO BECAUSE THEY'VE BEEN SHIFTING MATERIEL INTO POSITION.
AND ANGRY?
HAS ANYBODY WITH TABS ON THEIR SHOULDERS BROKEN A SWEAT YET TODAY?
NO, BUT I'LL BREAK SOME BONES IF YOU ASK NICELY!

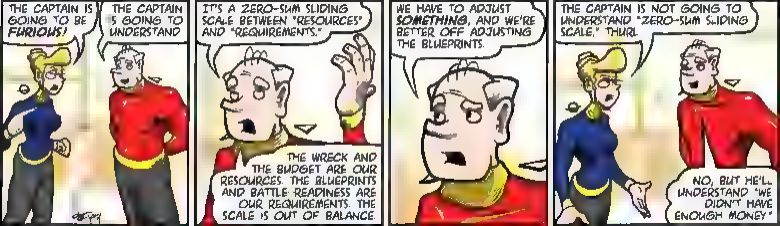

COMMANDER, IT'S BEEN ALMOST A WEEK SINCE ANY OF US HAVE SEEN PAR- ERR.. LIEUTENANT VENTURA.
IS SHE OKAY?
SHE'S FINE. SHE'S EATING TWICE EACH DAY, AND SHE'S GOTTEN SIX AND A HALF HOURS OF SLEEP EACH NIGHT
YOUR ONLY CONTACT WITH HER IS VIA HER SUIT TELEMETRY?
SHE HASN'T CHANGED CLOTHES YET WHEN SHE COMES OUT OF HER CABIN THINGS ARE GOING TO GET FUNKY

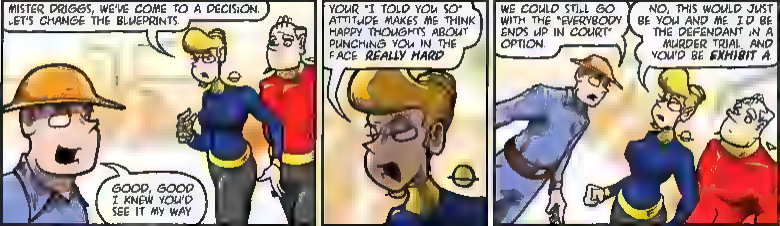

THURL, DO YOU HAVE A MINUTE?
PI, I'M SURE KEVYN CAN OFFER SOME ADVICE THERE
WHAT DO YOU MEAN "WHAT WOULD SCHLOCK DO?"
WELL, I GUESS THAT DEPENDS ON HOW MUCH FIREPOWER YOU'RE HAULING AROUND ON YOUR PERSON, NOW DOESN'T IT?
I'LL COME BACK LATER.

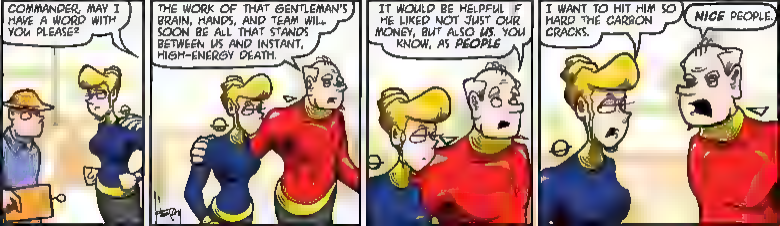

HIGH OLYMPUS SHIPYARDS, BERTH SIX OBSERVATION AREA. THE TOUCH AND GO HAS BEEN HERE FOR A LITTLE OVER ONE WEEK
IF YOU'RE KEEPING TIME, THAT'S WELL START MAKING CALLS IN HUNDRED AND THIRTY HOURS
YOU SEE THE ORIGINAL BLUEPRINTS JUST WON'T WORK. NOT AT ALL
THEY HAVE TO WORK THURL. TELL HIM THEY HAVE TO WORK
LET'S HEAR WHAT HE HAS TO SAY, COMMANDER
DO I NEED TO MAKE THAT AN ORDER?
ONLY IF YOU WANT TO LOOK LIKE A FOOL NOW HUSH. HE'S TRYING TO EXPLAIN


YOUR CAPTAIN GAVE ME A BUDGET THE ORIGINAL BLUEPRINTS AND HE GAVE ME THIS WRECK HE EXPECTS A SOLID FIT-FOR-BATTLE WARSHIP
IF YOU LET ME CHANGE THE BUDGET I CAN TURN THIS WRECK INTO THE WARSHIP ON THE BLUEPRINTS.
IF YOU'D GIVEN ME LESS OF A WRECK TO START WITH I COULD DELIVER A WARSHIP ON THIS BUDGET
IF YOU DECIDE YOU DON'T WANT A WARSHIP, I CAN DELIVER NOT-A-WARSHIP USING THIS WRECK THESE BLUEPRINTS, AND THIS BUDGET

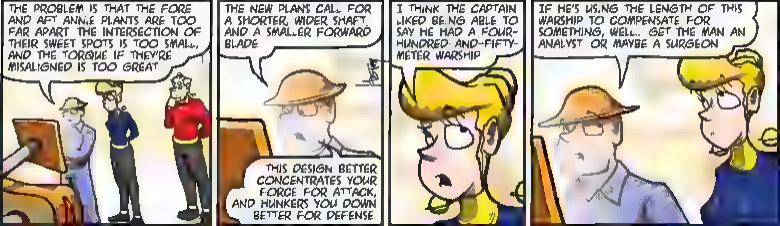

NONE OF THAT IS ACCEPTABLE AND YOU KNOW IT
EXACTLY
THAT LEAVES US TWO OPTIONS FIRST, THE SMART OPTION: WE ALTER THE BLUEPRINTS SO THAT THIS WRECK CAN BECOME A WARSHIP ON YOUR BUDGET
I ASSUME THERE'S A STUPID OPTION?
YOU SCREAM, SHOUT, POINT WEAPONS AT US, AND WE ALL END UP IN COURT YOU GET NO WARSHIP YOUR BUDGET GOES TO THE LAWYERS, AND WE KEEP THE WRECK
I ALMOST HOPE THAT'S THE ONE YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT PICKING! WE RE-SELL A LOT OF WRECKS THAT WAY

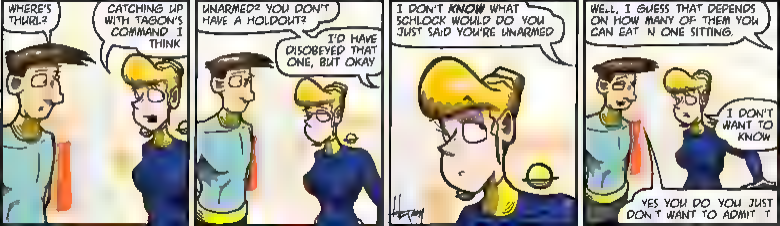

THE CAPTAIN IS GOING TO BE FURIOUS!
THE CAPTAIN IS GOING TO UNDERSTAND
IT'S A ZERO-SUM SLIDING SCALE BETWEEN "RESOURCES" AND "REQUIREMENTS."
THE WRECK AND THE BUDGET ARE OUR RESOURCES. THE BLUEPRINTS AND BATTLE READINESS ARE OUR REQUIREMENTS. THE SCALE IS OUT OF BALANCE.
WE HAVE TO ADJUST SOMETHING, AND WE'RE BETTER OFF ADJUSTING THE BLUEPRINTS.
THE CAPTAIN IS NOT GOING TO UNDERSTAND "ZERO-SUM SLIDING SCALE," THURL.
NO, BUT HE'LL UNDERSTAND "WE DIDN'T HAVE ENOUGH MONEY."

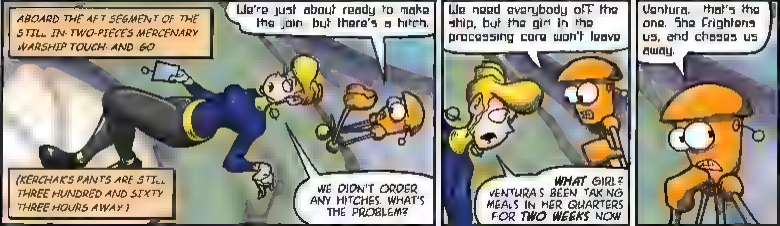

MISTER DRIGGS, WE'VE COME TO A DECISION. LET'S CHANGE THE BLUEPRINTS.
GOOD, GOOD I KNEW YOU'D SEE IT MY WAY
YOUR "I TOLD YOU SO" ATTITUDE MAKES ME THINK HAPPY THOUGHTS ABOUT PUNCHING YOU IN THE FACE REALLY HARD
WE COULD STILL GO WITH THE "EVERYBODY ENDS UP IN COURT" OPTION.
NO, THIS WOULD JUST BE YOU AND ME I'D BE THE DEFENDANT IN A MURDER TRIAL AND YOU'D BE EXHIBIT A

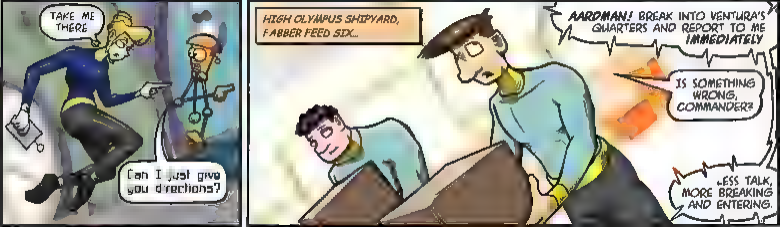

COMMANDER, MAY I HAVE A WORD WITH YOU PLEASE?
THE WORK OF THAT GENTLEMAN'S BRAIN, HANDS, AND TEAM WILL SOON BE ALL THAT STANDS BETWEEN US AND INSTANT, HIGH-ENERGY DEATH.
IT WOULD BE HELPFUL IF HE LIKED NOT JUST OUR MONEY, BUT ALSO US. YOU KNOW, AS PEOPLE
I WANT TO HIT HIM SO HARD THE CARBON CRACKS.
NICE PEOPLE

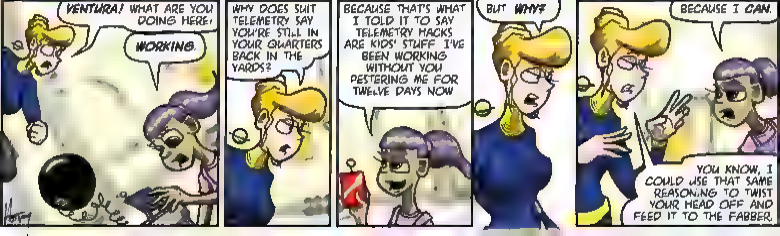

SORRY FOR THE HOLD-UP DRIGGS. LET'S SEE THE NEW BLUEPRINTS.
WELL, THE ORIGINAL DASHREMMAN OWNER WAS DOWNRIGHT PARANOID, SO HE DESIGNED THE SHIP TO PROVIDE CHOKE-POINTS TO HIS CONNING TOWER.
IT WAS A LONG, SLEEK DESIGN, BUT NOT IDEAL FOR KNOCKING AROUND WITH NO SHIELDS ALONG THE INSIDE OF A ROTATING CITY
AND YOU'RE DRAWING UP A SHIP DESIGN THAT IS IDEAL FOR KNOCKING AROUND LIKE THAT?
IDEAL? NO. THE ONLY SHIP IDEAL FOR THAT IS ONE THAT'S WELL-INSURED, AND THAT YOU'RE NOT RIDING INSIDE
"BUY GOOD INSURANCE" AND "DON'T RIDE INSIDE" ARE NOT WHAT I WANT TO FIND IN THE WINNING BID

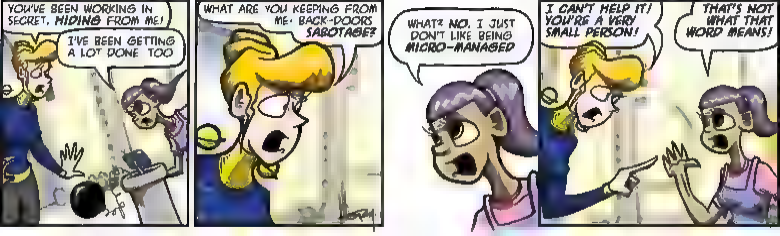

THE PROBLEM IS THAT THE FORE AND AFT ANNIE PLANTS ARE TOO FAR APART THE INTERSECTION OF THEIR SWEET SPOTS IS TOO SMALL, AND THE TORQUE IF THEY'RE MISALIGNED IS TOO GREAT
THE NEW PLANS CALL FOR A SHORTER, WIDER SHAFT AND A SMALLER FORWARD BLADE
THIS DESIGN BETTER CONCENTRATES YOUR FORCE FOR ATTACK, AND HUNKERS YOU DOWN BETTER FOR DEFENSE
I THINK THE CAPTAIN LIKED BEING ABLE TO SAY HE HAD A FOUR-HUNDRED-AND-FIFTY-METER WARSHIP
IF HE'S USING THE LENGTH OF THIS WARSHIP TO COMPENSATE FOR SOMETHING, WELL... GET THE MAN AN ANALYST OR MAYBE A SURGEON

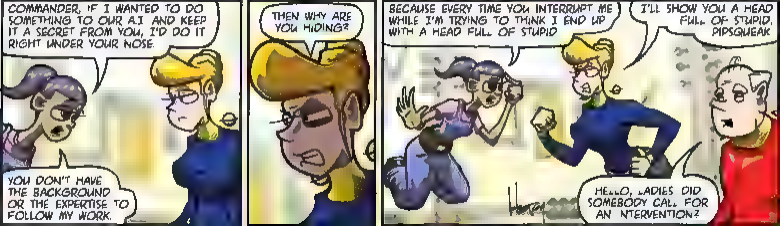

WHERE'S THURL?
CATCHING UP WITH TAGON'S COMMAND I THINK
UNARMED? YOU DON'T HAVE A HOLDOUT?
I'D HAVE DISOBEYED THAT ONE, BUT OKAY
I DON'T KNOW WHAT SCHLOCK WOULD DO YOU JUST SAID YOU'RE UNARMED
WELL, I GUESS THAT DEPENDS ON HOW MANY OF THEM YOU CAN EAT N ONE SITTING.
I DON'T WANT TO KNOW
YES YOU DO YOU JUST DON'T WANT TO ADMIT T

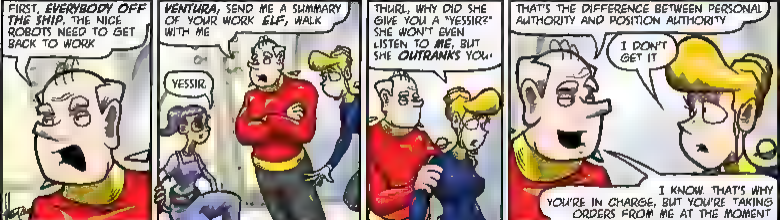

ABOARD THE AFT SEGMENT OF THE STIL. IN TWO-PIECE'S MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH AND GO
We're just about ready to make the join, but there's a hitch.
(KERCHAK'S PANTS ARE 3TL. THREE HUNDRED AND SIXTY THREE HOURS AWAY.)
WE DIDN'T ORDER ANY HITCHES. WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?
We need everybody off the ship, but the girl in the processing cons won't leave
WHAT GIRL?
VENTURA'S BEEN TAKING MEALS IN HER QUARTERS FOR TWO WEEKS NOW
Ventura. that's the one. She frightens us, and creeps us away.


TAKE ME THERE
Can I just give you directions?
HIGH OLYMPUS SHIPYARD, FABBER FEED SIX...
AARDMAN! BREAK INTO VENTURA'S QUARTERS AND REPORT TO ME IMMEDIATELY
IS SOMETHING WRONG, COMMANDER?
LESS TALK MORE BREAKING AND ENTERING

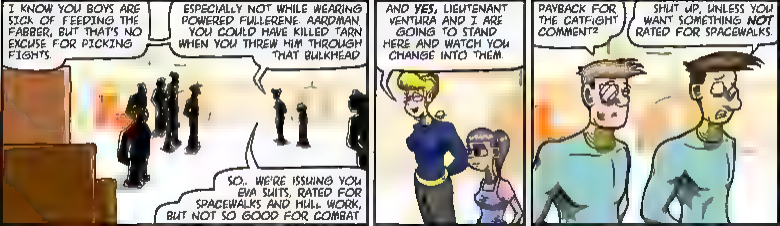

VENTURA! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE!
WORKING.
WHY DOES SUIT TELEMETRY SAY YOU'RE STILL IN YOUR QUARTERS BACK IN THE YARDS?
BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT I TOLD IT TO SAY TELEMETRY HACKS ARE KIDS' STUFF I'VE BEEN WORKING WITHOUT YOU PESTERING ME FOR TWELVE DAYS NOW
BUT WHY?
BECAUSE I CAN
YOU KNOW, I COULD USE THAT SAME REASONING TO TWIST YOUR HEAD OFF AND FEED IT TO THE FABBER.

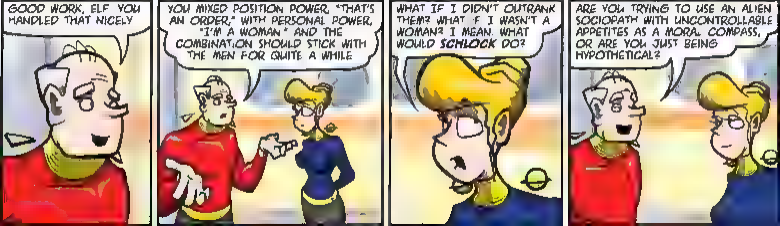

YOU'VE BEEN WORKING IN SECRET, HIDING FROM ME!
I'VE BEEN GETTING A LOT DONE TOO
WHAT ARE YOU KEEPING FROM ME- BACK-DOORS SABOTAGE?
WHAT? NO, I JUST DON'T LIKE BEING MICRO-MANAGED
I CAN'T HELP IT! YOU'RE A VERY SMALL PERSON!
THAT'S NOT WHAT THAT WORD MEANS!


COMMANDER, IF I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING TO OUR A.I AND KEEP IT A SECRET FROM YOU, I'D DO IT RIGHT UNDER YOUR NOSE.
YOU DON'T HAVE THE BACKGROUND OR THE EXPERTISE TO FOLLOW MY WORK.
THEN WHY ARE YOU HIDING?
BECAUSE EVERY TIME YOU INTERRUPT ME WHILE I'M TRYING TO THINK I END UP WITH A HEAD FULL OF STUPID
I'LL SHOW YOU A HEAD FULL OF STUPID, PIPSQUEAK
HELLO, LADIES DID SOMEBODY CALL FOR AN INTERVENTION?


FIRST, EVERYBODY OFF THE SHIP. THE NICE ROBOTS NEED TO GET BACK TO WORK
VENTURA, SEND ME A SUMMARY OF YOUR WORK ELF, WALK WITH ME
YESSIR.
THURL, WHY DID SHE GIVE YOU A "YESSIR?" SHE WON'T EVEN LISTEN TO ME, BUT SHE OUTRANKS YOU.
THAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PERSONAL AUTHORITY AND POSITION AUTHORITY
I DON'T GET IT
I KNOW. THAT'S WHY YOU'RE IN CHARGE, BUT YOU'RE TAKING ORDERS FROM ME AT THE MOMENT

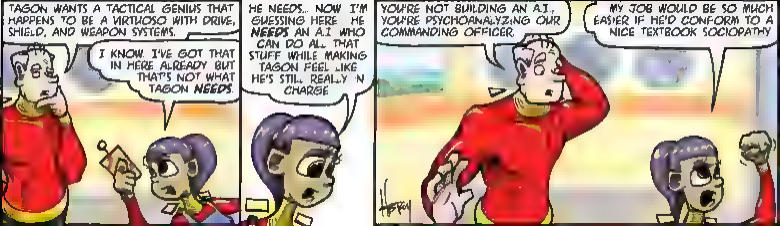

DID YOU HEAR? ELF AND VENTURA GOT IN A FIGHT
OOOH, CATFIGHT! YOU GOT SECURITY FOOTAGE?
GUYS, DON'T TALK ABOUT PARA THAT WAY SHE'S JUST A KID
A KID YOU'RE SWEET ON, AARDY BEFORE YOU START SNOGGING YOU'D BETTER ASK TO SEE HER I.D
TWO INTERVENTIONS IN ONE DAY? WE'VE BEEN HERE TOO LONG.

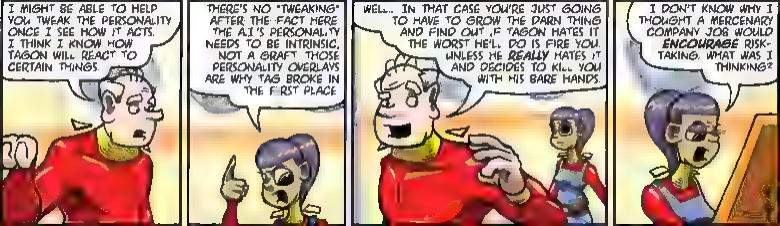

I KNOW YOU BOYS ARE SICK OF FEEDING THE FABBER, BUT THAT'S NO EXCUSE FOR PICKING FIGHTS.
ESPECIALLY NOT WHILE WEARING POWERED FULLERENE AARDMAN. YOU COULD HAVE KILLED TARN WHEN YOU THREW HIM THROUGH THAT BULKHEAD
SO... WE'RE ISSUING YOU EVA SUITS, RATED FOR SPACEWALKS AND HULL WORK, BUT NOT SO GOOD FOR COMBAT
AND YES, LIEUTENANT VENTURA AND I ARE GOING TO STAND HERE AND WATCH YOU CHANGE INTO THEM.
PAYBACK FOR THE CATFIGHT COMMENT?
SHUT UP, UNLESS YOU WANT SOMETHING NOT RATED FOR SPACEWALKS.

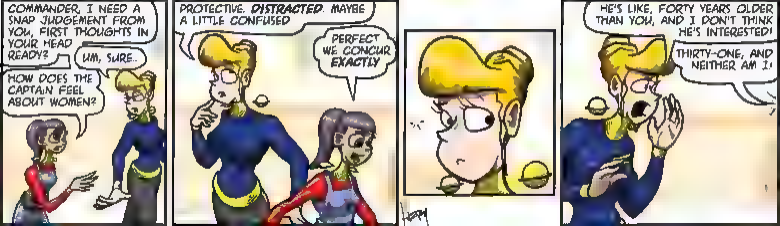

GOOD WORK, ELF. YOU HANDLED THAT NICELY.
YOU MIXED POSITION POWER, "THAT'S AN ORDER," WITH PERSONAL POWER, "I'M A WOMAN," AND THE COMBINATION SHOULD STICK WITH THE MEN FOR QUITE A WHILE.
WHAT IF I DIDN'T OUTRANK THEM? WHAT IF I WASN'T A WOMAN? I MEAN, WHAT WOULD SCHLOCK DO?
ARE YOU TRYING TO USE AN ALIEN SOCIOPATH WITH UNCONTROLLABLE APPETITES AS A MORAL COMPASS, OR ARE YOU JUST BEING HYPOTHETICAL?


HIGH OLYMPUS SHIPYARDS TEMPORARY QUARTERS
IT'S A DESIGN FLAW THAT'S WHAT IT IS. TAGON DOESN'T TRUST ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCES, SO COMMANDER ANDREYASN TRIED TO BUILD ONE THAT DOESN'T NEED TO BE TRUSTED
GENERAL KERCHAK'S NAKED TIME ENDS IN ONE HUNDRED AND NINETY-FIVE HOURS.
HE BUILT TAG WITH ENOUGH PROCESSING CAPACITY TO BE AN H-V SIX, BUT HOBBLED TAG'S "SENSE OF SELF" TO KEEP HIM IN LINE.
AND THAT'S WHY YOU CAN'T WAKE TAG BACK UP?
IT'S GOT TO BE HE HAD AN IDENTITY CRISIS, AND THE ONLY IDENTITY HE COULD FALL BACK ON WAS A COLLECTION OF OFF-THE-SHELF PERSONALITY OVERLAYS.

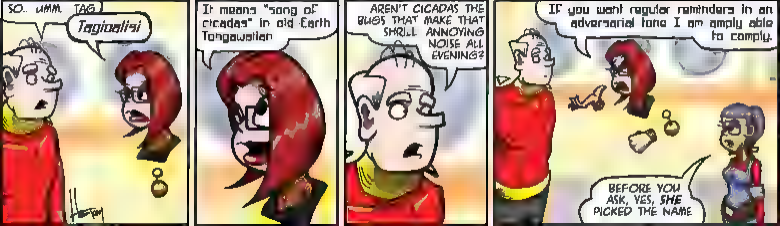

I'VE GOT A DESIGN HERE THAT I KNOW WILL WORK, BUT I'M GROWPRAMMING TO A SET OF REQUIREMENTS I'M NOT SURE I UNDERSTAND
LIEUTENANT, IF YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT'S REQUIRED OF A WARSHIP AI WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING MONKEYING AROUND WITH OURS?
I MISSPOKE I KNOW EXACTLY WHAT THE AI NEEDS TO DO FOR THE SHIP THE PROBLEM IS TABON
I DON'T KNOW WHAT HE WANTS BUT I KNOW THAT IF I ASK HIM HE'LL GIVE ME THE WRONG ANSWER THE CUSTOMER NEVER KNOWS WHAT HE REALLY NEEDS.


TAGON WANTS A TACTICAL GENIUS THAT HAPPENS TO BE A VIRTUOSO WITH DRIVE, SHIELD, AND WEAPON SYSTEMS.
I KNOW. I'VE GOT THAT IN HERE ALREADY BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT TAGON NEEDS.
HE NEEDS. NOW I'M GUESSING HERE HE NEEDS AN A.I WHO CAN DO AL. THAT STUFF WHILE MAKING TAGON FEEL LIKE HE'S STIL. REALLY 'N CHARGE
YOU'RE NOT BUILDING AN A.I., YOU'RE PSYCHOANALYZING OUR COMMANDING OFFICER.
MY JOB WOULD BE SO MUCH EASIER IF HE'D CONFORM TO A NICE TEXTBOOK SOCIOPATHY


I MIGHT BE ABLE TO HELP YOU TWEAK THE PERSONALITY ONCE I SEE HOW IT ACTS. I THINK I KNOW HOW TAGON WILL REACT TO CERTAIN THINGS
THERE'S NO "TWEAKING" AFTER THE FACT HERE. THE A.I.'S PERSONALITY NEEDS TO BE INTRINSIC, NOT A DRAFT. THOSE PERSONALITY OVERLAYS ARE WHY TAG BROKE IN THE FIRST PLACE
WELL... IN THAT CASE YOU'RE JUST GOING TO HAVE TO GROW THE DARN THING AND FIND OUT. IF TAGON HATES IT THE WORST HE'L DO IS FIRE YOU. UNLESS HE *REALLY* HATES IT AND DECIDES TO KL... YOU WITH HIS BARE HANDS.
I DON'T KNOW WHY I THOUGHT A MERCENARY COMPANY JOB WOULD *ENCOURAGE* RISK-TAKING. WHAT WAS I THINKING?

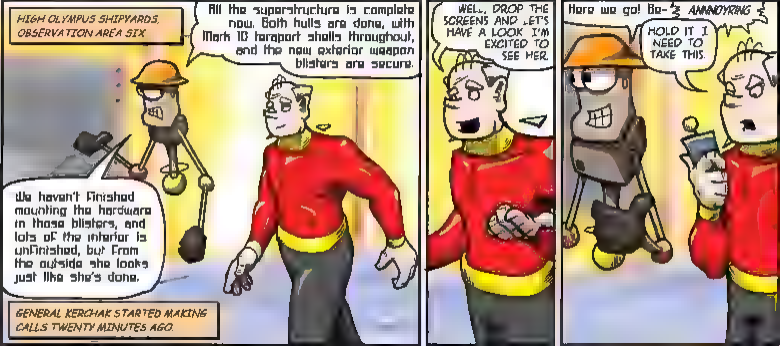

COMMANDER, I NEED A SNAP JUDGEMENT FROM YOU. FIRST THOUGHTS IN YOUR HEAD READY?
UM, SURE...
HOW DOES THE CAPTAIN FEEL ABOUT WOMEN?
PROTECTIVE. DISTRACTED. MAYBE A LITTLE CONFUSED
PERFECT. WE CONCUR. EXACTLY
HE'S LIKE, FORTY YEARS OLDER THAN YOU, AND I DON'T THINK HE'S INTERESTED!
THIRTY-ONE, AND NEITHER AM I!


THURL, WILL YOU COME TALK TO THE A.I. AND LET ME KNOW WHETHER I'M GOING TO GET MURDERED BY OUR CAPTAIN?
OKAY.
I CAN'T DO MUCH TWEAKING, BUT IF YOU THINK TAGON WIL. HATE IT I CAN JUST START OVER THERE'S LESS JOB RISK THAT WAY
SHE'S PERFECT
Hmph. If I set my avatar to "Crumpy" will you talk to me before deciding?

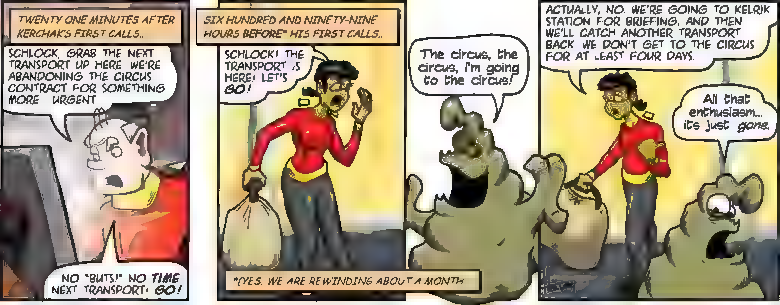

SO. UMM. TAG
Tagiaulisi
It means "song of cicadas" in old Earth Tongaualian
AREN'T CICADAS THE BUGS THAT MAKE THAT SHRILL ANNOYING NOISE ALL EVENING?
IF you want regular reminders in an adversarial tone I am amply able to comply.
BEFORE YOU ASK, YES, SHE PICKED THE NAME


HEY AARDY! PARA BROUGHT TAG BACK, BUT NOW HE'S A SHE
SO?
SO! OUR SHIP'S A.I. IS NOW A WO-MAN! WEIRD, HUH?
TARN. CAN YOU THINK OF EVEN ONE GENDER-DEPENDENT ATTRIBUTE THAT MATTERS HERE?
HOTNESS.
I.Q.


Thurl, between the clowns, the cops, and the mandlers. I don't know what I should do
I DON'T BELIEVE IT
Believe what?
I'VE BEEN ANSWERING "WHAT WOULD SCHLOCK DO?" QUESTIONS FOR A MONTH NOW I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M GETTING ONE FROM SCHLOCK HIMSELF
So..
EAT IT. KILL IT. MAKE FRIENDS WITH IT. OR TAKE A BATH IN IT. THOSE ARE THE POINTS ON YOUR MORAL COMPASS


HIGH OLYMPUS SHIPYARDS, OBSERVATION AREA SIX.
All the superstructure is complete now. Both hulls are done, with Mark 10 torpart shells throughout, and the new exterior weapon blisters are secure.
We haven't finished mounting the hardware in those blisters, and lots of the interior is unfinished, but from the outside she looks just like she's done.
GENERAL KERCHAK STARTED MAKING CALLS TWENTY MINUTES AGO.
WELL, DROP THE SCREENS AND LET'S HAVE A LOOK. I'M EXCITED TO SEE HER.
Here we go! Bo-
ANNOYING
HOLD IT. I NEED TO TAKE THIS

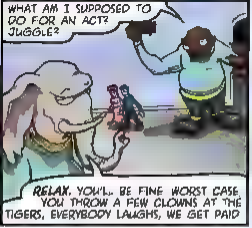

THURL HERE.
MIKKY, LONG TIME WHAT'S THE OCC-
OH?
HEY, ROBOT! LET'S SEE HOW FAST YOU CAN GET SOME OF THOSE WEAPONS HOOKED UP AND LOAD THE REST OF 'EM IN ONE OF THE BAYS. WE WILL BE LEAVING IN A HURRY
But don't you want to see what she looks like?
I'M SURE SHE'S VERY PRETTY NOW GET HER READY TO GO


TWENTY ONE MINUTES AFTER KERCHAK'S FIRST CALLS..
SCHLOCK, GRAB THE NEXT TRANSPORT UP HERE. WE'RE ABANDONING THE CIRCUS CONTRACT FOR SOMETHING MORE URGENT.
NO "BUTS". NO TIME. NEXT TRANSPORT. GO!
SIX HUNDRED AND NINETY-NINE HOURS BEFORE" HIS FIRST CALLS..
SCHLOCK! THE TRANSPORT IS HERE! LET'S GO!
"(YES. WE ARE REWINDING ABOUT A MONTH)"
The circus, the circus, I'm going to the circus!
ACTUALLY, NO. WE'RE GOING TO KELRIK STATION FOR BRIEFING, AND THEN WE'LL CATCH ANOTHER TRANSPORT BACK. WE DON'T GET TO THE CIRCUS FOR AT LEAST FOUR DAYS.
All that enthusiasm... It's just gone.


SERGEANT WE'RE GOING TO BE UNDER COVER. WE HAVE TO ARRIVE WITH THE REST OF THE PERFORMERS THEY'RE ROTATING IN.
Yeah, but four days of travel? That's way too much time to sit around staring at the stars.
WE ALSO HAVE TO FIGURE OUT ACTS FOR EACH OF US WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE PERFORMERS, AFTER ALL.
Four days? FOUR DAYS!? WE ONLY HAVE FOUR DAYS!!


An act? What am I supposed to do for an act?
Circuses are full of experts and athletes! What can I do that they can't?
I'VE SEEN YOU SWALLOW YOUR OWN EYEBALLS AND GROW EXTRA HANDS.
That doesn't count. Any amorph can do that.
AND I'M SURE EVERY SINGLE EXTREMELY RARE CARBOSILICATE AMORPH IN THE AUDIENCE WILL BE QUICK TO POINT THAT OUT.


People have got to be smart enough to see through that "Oh, he's just an alien. He can do that stuff easy."
WHY DO YOU THINK THE BARSOOM CIRCUS RECRUITS NEW PERFORMERS FROM ALL OVER THE GALAXY EACH MONTH? PEOPLE COME TO SEE THE ALIENS DO WEIRD, ALIEN STUFF
Are we joining a circus or a freak show?
YES


WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO FOR AN ACT? JUGGLE?
RELAX. YOU'LL BE FINE WORST CASE, YOU THROW A FEW CLOWNS AT THE TIGERS, EVERYBODY LAUGHS, WE GET PAID

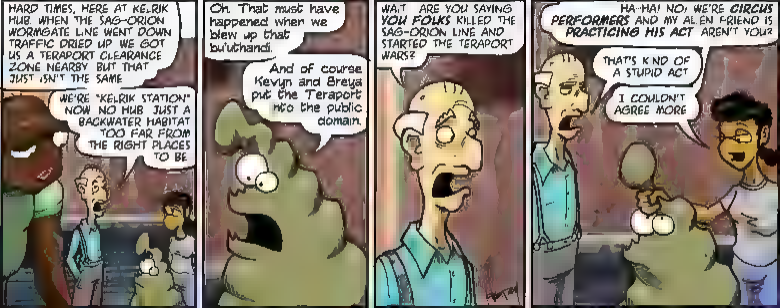

THAT'S EASY FOR YOU TO SAY AL. YOU HAVE TO DO IS WALK AROUND ON FOUR LEGS AND GRAB ANOTHER ELEPHANT'S BUTT WITH YOUR NOSE

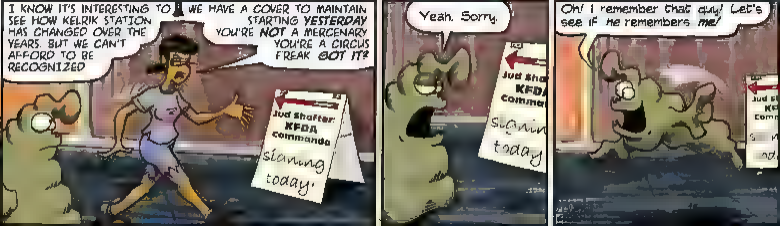


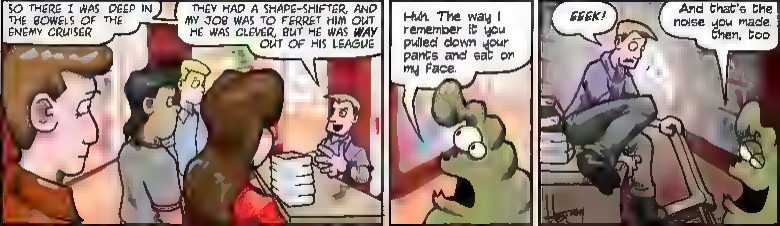

I AM ASHAMED OF YOU. ARE YOU REALLY BOTH SO STRESSED OUT THAT YOU'RE FIGHTING FOR NO REASON AT ALL?
YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE THINKING OF CIRCUS ACTS YOU CAN PULL OFF WITH S,ZE, STRENGTH OR PROWESS. INSTEAD YOU GET ANGRY AND GO RAMPAGING DOWN THE MAIN DECK TERRIFYING THE OTHER PASSENGERS
I.. WAIT
HANG ON.. YOU TWO MAY BE ON TO SOMETHING.


KELRIK STATION, FORMERLY... THE KELRIK HUB IT IS LESS BUSY THESE DAYS
Oh! I remember this place! We went out for seafood at a fancy restaurant right around the corner
Some wacko held the place up, screaming and shouting, waving guns around. Good times! Let's go have a look!
SERGEANT, I'M PRETTY SURE HE'S NOT GOING TO STILL BE THERE THEY HAULED H'M TO THE MORGUE YEARS AGO
Oh, I know. I just want to see if that crusty old waiter is still

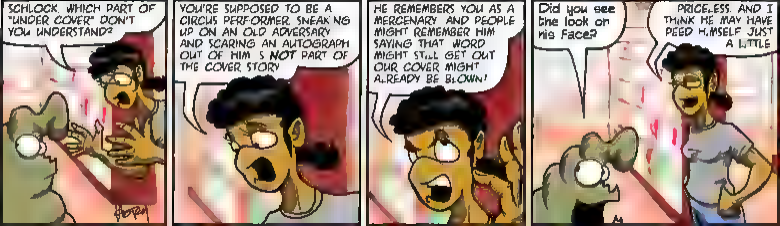

there?
They turned it into a used space-suit store.
And it's closed
AYUP BEEN C.LOSED FOR YEARS NOW I MISS THEM PEEL AND-EAT PRAWNOIDS.


HARD TIMES, HERE AT KE-RIK HUB. WHEN THE SAG-ORION WORMGATE LINE WENT DOWN TRAFFIC DRIED UP. WE GOT US A TERAPORT CLEARANCE ZONE NEARBY, BUT THAT JUST ISN'T THE SAME
WE'RE "KE-RIK STATION" NOW. NO HUB. JUST A BACKWATER HABITAT TOO FAR FROM THE RIGHT PLACES TO BE
Oh. That must have happened when we blew up that bu'uthandi.
And of course Kevyn and Breya put the Teraport into the public domain.
WAIT. ARE YOU SAYING YOU FOLKS KILLED THE SAG-ORION LINE AND STARTED THE TERAPORT WARS?
HA-HA! NO! WE'RE CIRCUS PERFORMERS AND MY ALIEN FRIEND IS PRACTICING HIS ACT. AREN'T YOU?
THAT'S KIND OF A STUPID ACT.
I COULDN'T AGREE MORE.


I KNOW IT'S INTERESTING TO SEE HOW KELRIK STATION HAS CHANGED OVER THE YEARS. BUT WE CAN'T AFFORD TO BE RECOGNIZED
WE HAVE A COVER TO MAINTAIN STARTING YESTERDAY. YOU'RE NOT A MERCENARY. YOU'RE A CIRCUS FREAK. GOT IT?
Just Shatter KFDA Commando
Starting today.
Yeah. Sorry.
Just Shatter KFDA Commando
Starting today.
Oh! I remember that guy! Let's see if he remembers me!

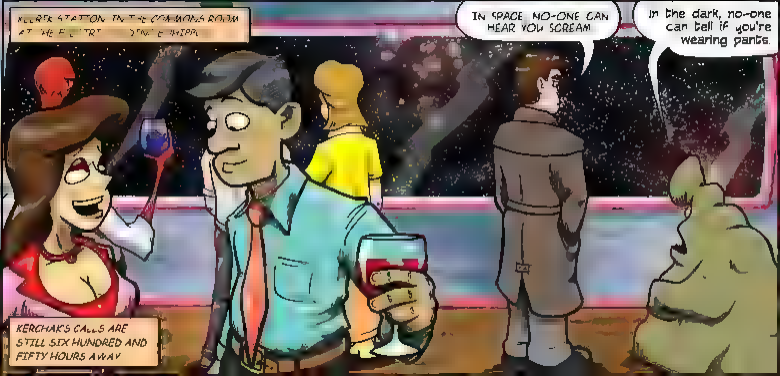

SO THERE I WAS DEEP IN THE BOWELS OF THE ENEMY CRUISER
THEY HAD A SHAPE-SHIFTER, AND MY JOB WAS TO FERRET HIM OUT HE WAS CLEVER, BUT HE WAS WAY OUT OF HIS LEAGUE
Hmm. The way I remember it you pulled down your pants and sat on my face.
EEEK!
And that's the noise you made then, too

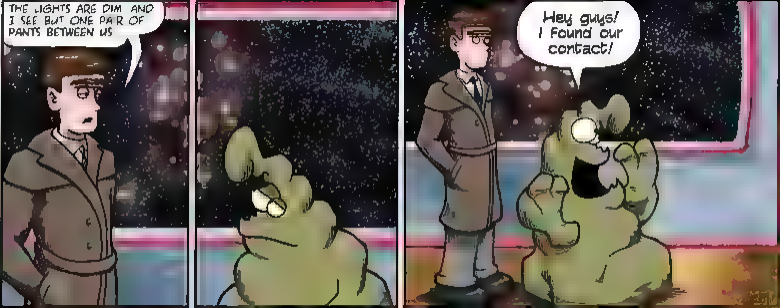

WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? ASSASSINATION??
Umm, no. I just wanted you to sign my book.
OH. OKAY. THEN.
HOW'S THE MERCENARY BUSINESS?
It's awesome. Never been better
So I joined the circus. You know, for the horses.
GOOD SAVE, SUPER-SPY

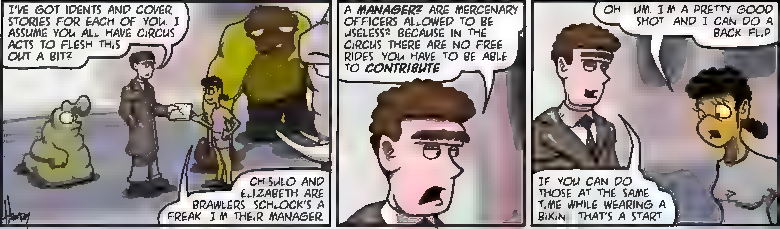

SCHLOCK, WHICH PART OF "UNDER COVER" DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND?
YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE A CIRCUS PERFORMER. SNEAKING UP ON AN OLD ADVERSARY AND SCARING AN AUTOGRAPH OUT OF HIM IS NOT PART OF THE COVER STORY.
HE REMEMBERS YOU AS A MERCENARY AND PEOPLE MIGHT REMEMBER HIM SAYING THAT WORD MIGHT STILL GET OUT. OUR COVER MIGHT ALREADY BE BLOWN!
Did you see the look on his face?
PRICELESS. AND I THINK HE MAY HAVE PEED HIMSELF JUST A LITTLE


HEY, CIRCUS MERCENARY! WAIT UP!
OH GREAT LOOK WHAT YOU'VE DONE.
I'M WONDERING. SINCE THIS CIRCUS OF YOURS HIRES EX-MERCENARIES DO THEY HIRE EX-COMMANDOS? WITH WRITING EXPERIENCE?
OKAY I ADMIT THAT I HAD IT GHOST-WRITTEN. BUT HEY, NAME RECOGNITION. RIGHT?


I'M SORRY MISTER SHAFTER, WE DON'T MAKE THE HIRING DECISIONS WE'RE JUST PERFORMERS
YOU'RE SHIPPING OUT TO MARS, RIGHT? I COULD COME ALONG AND HAND-DELIVER MY RESUME
NOT ON MY SHUTTLE I DON'T LIKE THE WAY YOU SMELL
THAT'S URINE SIR, SORRY


KERCHAK'S CALLS ARE STILL SIX HUNDRED AND FIFTY HOURS AWAY
IN SPACE NO-ONE CAN HEAR YOU SCREAM
In the dark, no-one can tell if you're wearing pants.


THE LIGHTS ARE DIM AND I SEE BUT ONE PAIR OF PANTS BETWEEN US
Hey guys! I found our contact!

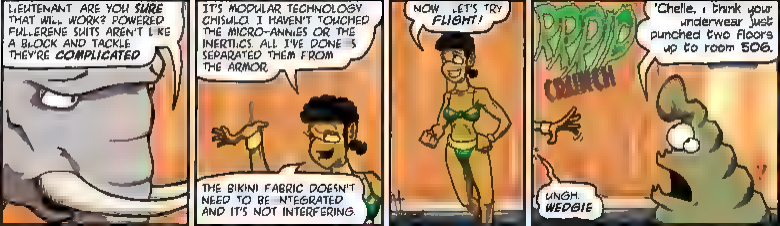

I'VE GOT IDENTS AND COVER STORIES FOR EACH OF YOU. I ASSUME YOU ALL HAVE CIRCUS ACTS TO FLESH THIS OUT A BIT?
OH, WILD AND ELIZABETH ARE BRAWLERS. SCHLOCK'S A FREAK. I'M THEIR MANAGER.
A MANAGER? ARE MERCENARY OFFICERS ALLOWED TO BE USELESS? BECAUSE IN THE CIRCUS THERE ARE NO FREE RIDES. YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO CONTRIBUTE.
OH. UM. I'M A PRETTY GOOD SHOT. AND I CAN DO A BACK FLIP.
IF YOU CAN DO THOSE AT THE SAME TIME WHILE WEARING A BIKINI, THAT'S A START.


MAINTAINING YOUR COVER IS IMPORTANT MARINER! S.D.C POLICE HAS TRIED INFILTRATING THE BARSOOM CIRCUS BEFORE AND IT DIDN'T GO WELL
THE FIRST TIME WE DRESSED ONE OF OUR OWN COPS AS A CLOWN. A WEEK LATER HE GOT SHOT OUT OF A CANNON
Clowns get shot out of cannons all the time.
AT NIGHT OFF THE DAM? HE CLEARED TWO KLICKS OF SKYLINE BEFORE HITTING THE CLIFFS. WE HAD TO IDENTIFY HIM WITH BAKED DNA AND THE SERIAL NUMBER IN HIS RUBBER NOSE


THE BARSOOM CIRCUS IS MAKING ABOUT TEN TIMES AS MUCH MONEY AS IT SHOULD BE. WE WANT YOU TO FIND OUT WHERE THAT MONEY IS COMING FROM.
THAT'S IT? NO LEADS? NOT EVEN HINTS?
IT'S ALL WE'VE GOT. THEY COULD BE LAUNDERING MONEY, OR PERHAPS THEY'RE SELLING DRUGS IN THE COTTON CANDY.
You guys look for the money soap. I'll work the cotton candy angle.


NOW IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME I'VE ALREADY BEEN HERE TOO LONG
I'M TAKING THE LONG WAY BACK AND WON'T ARRIVE AGAIN ON MARS FOR ANOTHER WEEK
THAT WAY NOBODY HERE WILL CONNECT ME AND MARINERIS D.C POLICE WITH YOU.
MAN I THOUGHT HE'D NEVER LEAVE THAT MONOBROW OF HIS CREEPS ME OUT
CAN THAT STUFF WAIT UNTIL I'M AT LEAST OUT OF EARSHOT?


What cha doing?
PICKING MY UNIFORM APART FOR CIRCUS COSTUME BITS
OUR CONTACT SAID I SHOULD WEAR A BIKINI
I'M GOING TO WEAR ONE THAT LETS ME FLY
THE COLLAR CUFFS, ANKLE BANDS, AND BELT HAVE EVERYTHING I NEED
There's no crotch
ALMOST EVERYTHING I NEED

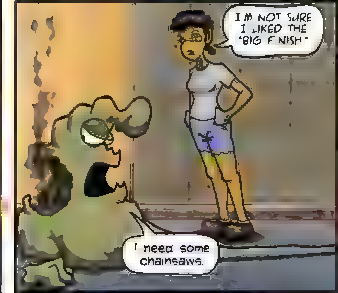

LIEUTENANT. ARE YOU SURE THAT WILL WORK? POWERED FULLERENE SUITS AREN'T LIKE A BLOCK AND TACKLE. THEY'RE COMPLICATED
IT'S MODULAR TECHNOLOGY, CHISULO. I HAVEN'T TOUCHED THE MICRO-ANNIES OR THE INERTICS. ALL I'VE DONE IS SEPARATED THEM FROM THE ARMOR.
THE BIKINI FABRIC DOESN'T NEED TO BE INTEGRATED AND IT'S NOT INTERFERING.
NOW. LET'S TRY FLIGHT!
RRRIP
CRUNCH
UNGH. WEDGIE
'Chelle. I think your underwear just punched two floors up to room 506.

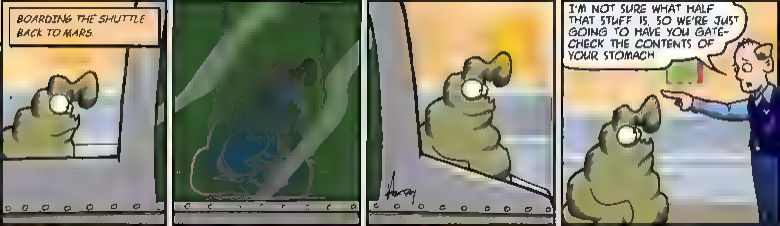





OMMMNOUS
HUMMMMMM



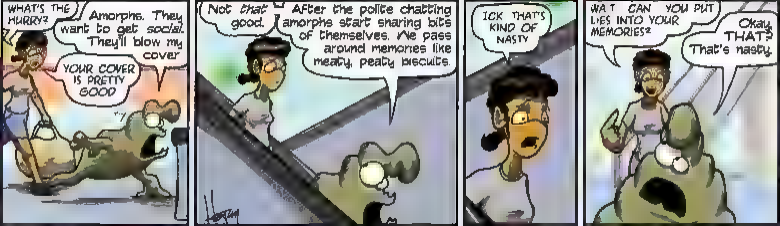

I'M NOT SURE I LIKED THE "BIG FINISH."
I need some chainsaws.

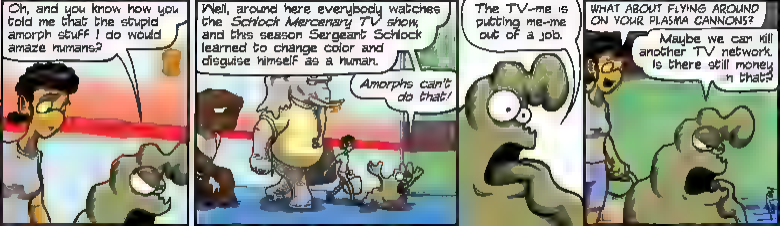

BOARDING THE SHUTTLE BACK TO MARS.
I'M NOT SURE WHAT HALF THAT STUFF IS, SO WE'RE JUST GOING TO HAVE YOU GATE-CHECK THE CONTENTS OF YOUR STOMACH


ARRIVAL, MARINERIS DAM CITY SKYPORT MARS..
Gate-check. Here's the stub.
TUR 116, HERE YOU GO.
Hmph. It tastes funny.
YEAH, THAT'S WHAT THE BAGGAGE HANDLERS SAID

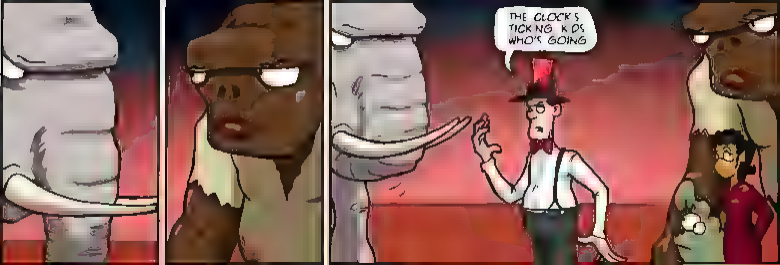

Remember how you said my stupid amorph tricks wouldn't be stupid because I'm the only amorph on the planet?
Well, the baggage handlers tasted my luggage.
I'M NOT FOLLOWING YOU.
You know how I'm always putting stuff in my mouth?
Wah! There you are, cousin!
It's not a 'me' thing. It's an 'amorph' thing.


We tasted your carry-offs. You get around, cousin!
Ummm.. yeah. I guess I do. Circus life, you know?
Circus life! Yeah, they just rotated us out. Stupid Barsoomies didn't like our act.
'Stretching is easy! Change colors, or turn into a person, like Sergeant Schlock on the TV!'
Those Schlock TV writers are ruining things for the rest of us.
Anyway, I'm Nozz, and these guys are Muck and Pod. What's your name?
Whoa, look at the time. Gotta go, guys.


WHAT'S THE HURRY?
Amorphs. They want to get social. They'll blow my cover
YOUR COVER IS PRETTY GOOD
Not that good.
After the polite chatting amorphs start sharing bits of themselves. We pass around memories like meaty, peaty biscuits
ICK. THAT'S KIND OF NASTY
WAT CAN YOU PUT LIES INTO YOUR MEMORIES?
Okay, THAT'S That's nasty.

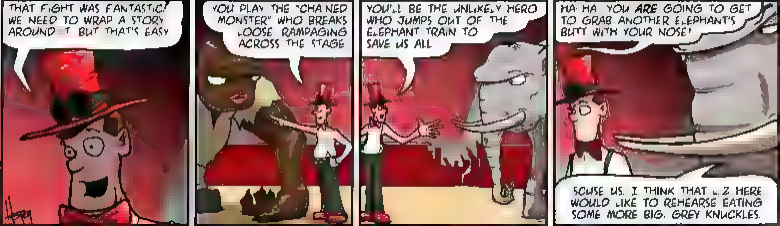

Oh, and you know how you told me that the stupid amorph stuff I do would amaze humans?
Well, around here everybody watches the Schlock Mercenary TV show, and this season Sergeant Schlock learned to change color and disguise himself as a human.
Amorphs can't do that!
The TV-me is putting me-me out of a job.
WHAT ABOUT FLYING AROUND ON YOUR PLASMA CANNONS?
Maybe we can kill another TV network. Is there still money in that?

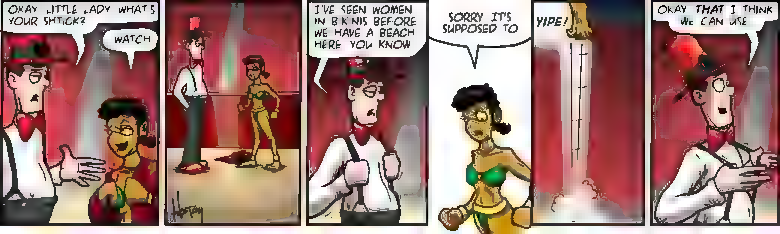

THE BARROOM CIRCUS MARINERIS DAM CITY MARS
WELCOME TO BARSOOM. I AM THE STAGE BOSS. GINRIN LARGO
I'LL CUT TO THE CHASE WE'VE GOT ABOUT THREE DAYS TO WORK YOUR ACTS INTO THE SHOW
SO. SHOW ME WHAT YOU CAN DO IMPRESS ME
KERO-AK GETS HIRED BY PETEY IN ABOUT SIX HUNDRED HOURS

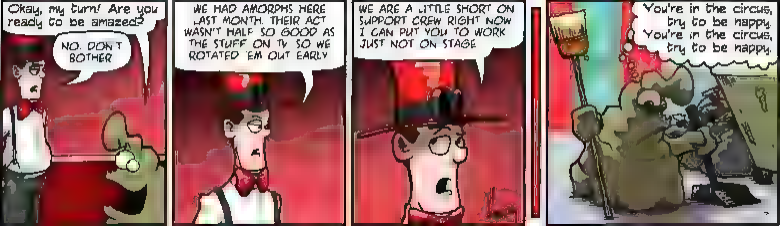

THE CLOCK'S TICKING N OS WHO'S GOING

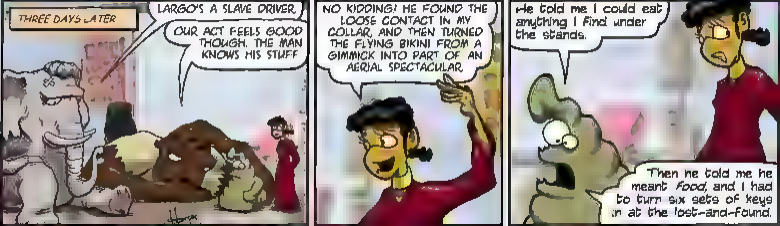

FIGHT!!


I... I THINK WE CAN USE THIS.
LET ME GO GET FRESH PANTS


THAT FIGHT WAS FANTASTIC! WE NEED TO WRAP A STORY AROUND IT BUT THAT'S EASY
"OU PLAY THE "CHANED MONSTER" WHO BREAKS LOOSE RAMPAGING ACROSS THE STAGE
YOU'LL BE THE UNLIKELY HERO WHO JUMPS OUT OF THE ELEPHANT TRAIN TO SAVE US ALL
HA HA YOU ARE GOING TO GET TO GRAB ANOTHER ELEPHANT'S BUTT WITH YOUR NOSE!
SOUSE US. I THINK THAT U Z HERE WOULD LIKE TO REHEARSE EATING SOME MORE BIG, GREY KNUCKLES.


OKAY, LITTLE LADY WHAT'S YOUR SHTICK?
WATCH
I'VE SEEN WOMEN IN BIKINIS BEFORE WE HAVE A BEACH HERE YOU KNOW
SORRY IT'S SUPPOSED TO
YIPE!
OKAY THAT I THINK WE CAN USE

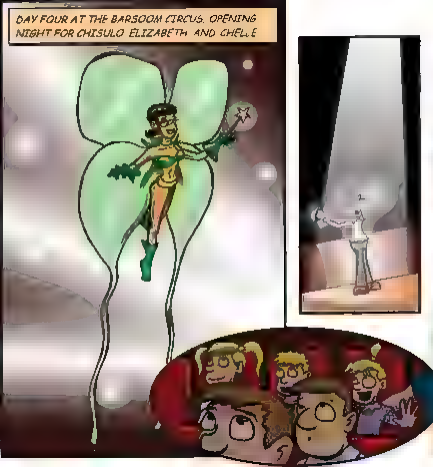

Okay, my turn! Are you ready to be amazed?
NO. DON'T BOTHER
WE HAD AMORPHS HERE LAST MONTH. THEIR ACT WASN'T HALF SO GOOD AS THE STUFF ON TV SO WE ROTATED 'EM OUT EARLY
WE ARE A LITTLE SHORT ON SUPPORT CREW RIGHT NOW I CAN PUT YOU TO WORK JUST NOT ON STAGE
You're in the circus, try to be happy. You're in the circus, try to be happy.


THREE DAYS LATER
LARGO'S A SLAVE DRIVER.
OUR ACT FEELS GOOD THOUGH. THE MAN KNOWS HIS STUFF.
NO KIDDING! HE FOUND THE LOOSE CONTACT IN MY COLLAR, AND THEN TURNED THE FLYING BIKINI FROM A GIMMICK INTO PART OF AN AERIAL SPECTACULAR.
He told me I could eat anything I find under the stands.
Then he told me he meant food, and I had to turn six sets of keys in at the lost-and-found.


I'll say this much. The circus is interesting.
OH, GOOD. ARE YOU GETTING TO SEE SOME OF THE SHOW, THEN?
Yeah, but I'm talking about all the smells and the tastes.
So many people, all of them just brimming with pheromones and secretions, perfumes and soaps.
Did you know that old popcorn bags taste like butter, salt, and sweat?
I DO NOW


SARGE, THIS IS PERFECT AS A JANITOR YOU CAN OBSERVE THINGS WE CAN'T
THERE'S SUPPOSED TO BE SOME BIG MONEY-CRIME THING GOING DOWN. BUT CHISULO, ELIZABETH AND I HAVEN'T GOTTEN THE FIRST SNIFF OF IT
Lieutenant, I spent six hours last night cleaning the 'Interspecies Biological Evacuation Cubicles.
If you want a sniff of something criminal, just
OKAY, OKAY I CONFESS TO POOR WORD CHOICE

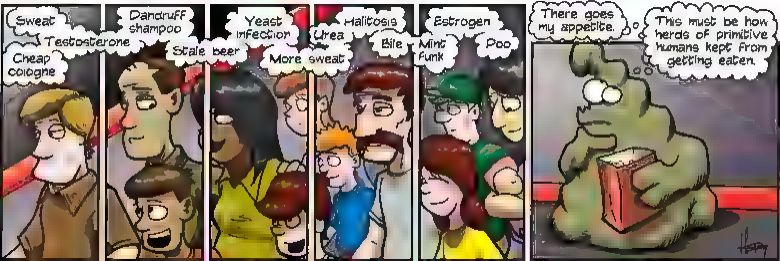
DAY FOUR AT THE BARSOOM CIRCUS. OPENING NIGHT FOR CHISULO ELIZABETH AND CHELLE



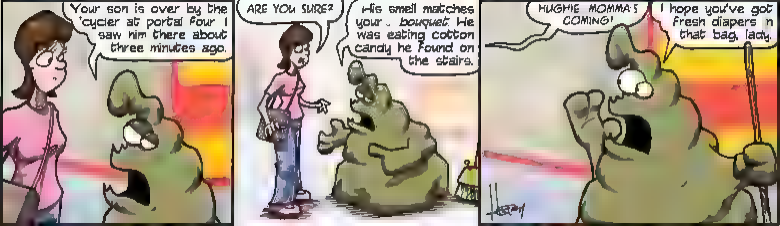
THIS IS THE SEVENTH DAY SINCE THEIR DEPARTURE FROM HIGH OLYMPUS

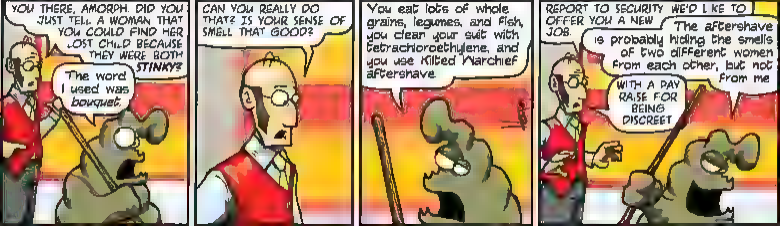


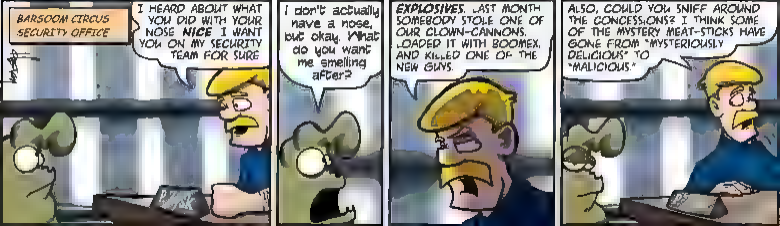

THEY'LL BE SUMMONED BACK IN JUST OVER TWENTY TWO DAYS BUT THEY DON'T KNOW THAT YET
IT'S GOING TO TAKE LONGER THAN THAT FOR YOU FAIR READER BETTER GET SOME POPCORN


Sweat
Cheap cologne
Testosterone
Dandruff shampoo
Stale beer
Yeast infection
More sweat
Urea
Halitosis
Bile
Estrogen
Mint
Funk
Poo
There goes my appetite.
This must be how herds of primitive humans kept from getting eaten.

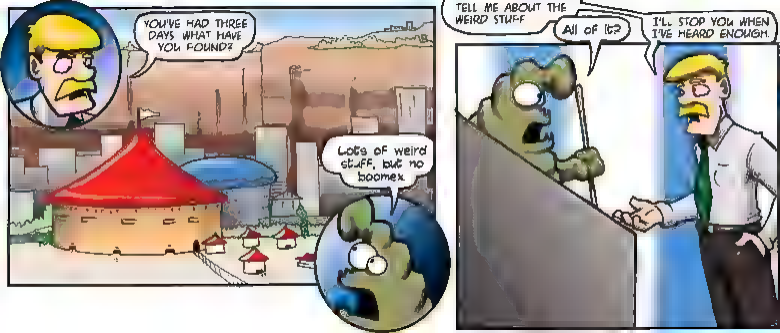

YOU THERE! DO YOU WORK HERE?
Cheerfully, Ma'am.
I'VE LOST MY LITTLE BOY! HE WAS RIGHT NEXT TO ME A MINUTE AGO. HE'
Don't describe him. If he lives with you, eats with you, and sprang from your loins, then he smells like you.
YOU CAN SMELL ME?
From here. No, no, don't come any closer. I've got all I need.


Your son is over by the 'cycler at portal four I saw him there about three minutes ago.
ARE YOU SURE?
His smell matches your . bouquet. He was eating cotton candy he found on the stairs.
HUGHIE MOMMA'S COMING!
I hope you've got fresh diapers in that bag, lady.

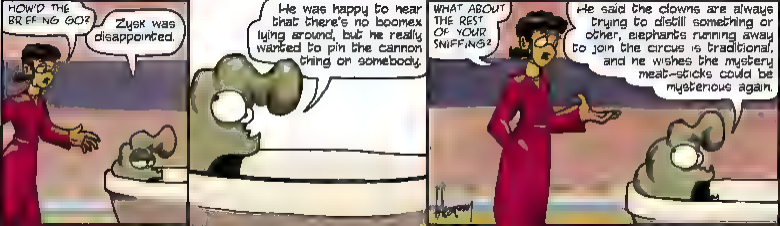

YOU THERE, AMORPH. DID YOU JUST TELL A WOMAN THAT YOU COULD FIND HER LOST CHILD BECAUSE THEY WERE BOTH STINKY?
The word I used was bouquet.
CAN YOU REALLY DO THAT? IS YOUR SENSE OF SMELL THAT GOOD?
You eat lots of whole grains, legumes, and fish, you clean your suit with tetrachloroethylene, and you use Killed Warchief aftershave.
REPORT TO SECURITY. WE'D LIKE TO OFFER YOU A NEW JOB.
The aftershaves is probably hiding the smells of two different women from each other, but not from me.
WITH A PAY RAISE FOR BEING DISCREET


BARSOOM CIRCUS SECURITY OFFICE
I HEARD ABOUT WHAT YOU DID WITH YOUR NOSE NICE I WANT YOU ON MY SECURITY TEAM FOR SURE
I don't actually have a nose, but okay. What do you want me smelling after?
EXPLOSIVES. LAST MONTH SOMEBODY STOLE ONE OF OUR CLOWN-CANNONS, LOADED IT WITH BOOMEX, AND KILLED ONE OF THE NEW GUYS.
ALSO, COULD YOU SNIFF AROUND THE CONCESSIONS? I THINK SOME OF THE MYSTERY MEAT-STICKS HAVE GONE FROM "MYSTERIOUSLY DELICIOUS" TO "MALICIOUS."


Chelle, my sense of smell just got me hired to do security here. Mister Zysk wants me sniffing for explosives and food poisoning.
THAT'S GREAT! YOU WON'T HAVE TO PLAY JANITOR ANYMORE, AND WE'LL GET A BREAK IN THIS CASE
Unless Zysk is in on it, whatever 'it' is, and this is just a way to keep tabs on me.
TRUE BUT HEY AT LEAST YOU
He told me to keep doing the janitor thing as a cover

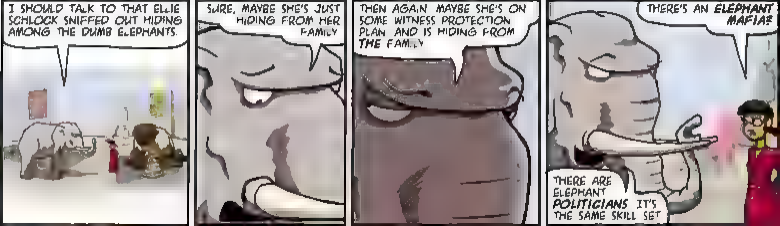

YOU'VE HAD THREE DAYS WHAT HAVE YOU FOUND?
Lots of weird stuff, but no boomex.
TELL ME ABOUT THE WEIRD STUFF
All of it?
I'LL STOP YOU WHEN I'VE HEARD ENOUGH.


Okay. The animal handlers lost six capybara to a virus a week ago, but the virus has now run its course.
The clowns have a still and are trying to turn smuggled Robough Red Grapes into a merlot brandy. The smell says they are about halfway to inedible.
MMM-HMMM. CLOWNS.
One of your Indian Elephants .s actually an elephas maximus sapiens. I have no idea what she's doing here.
INTERESTING. GO ON.
Concessions started to use capybara in the mystery meat-sticks five days ago.
AAAND STOP.


HOW'D THE BRIEFING GO?
Zysk was disappointed.
He was happy to hear that there's no boomex lying around, but he really wanted to pin the cannon thing on somebody.
WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF YOUR SNIFFING?
He said the clowns are always trying to distill something or other, elephants running away to join the circus is traditional, and he wishes the mystery meat-sticks could be mysterious again.


ARE YOU SURE THERE WAS NO TRACE OF BOOMEX HERE?
Not a sniff, and I sniffed everywhere. And I crawled into some strange, stinky places, too.
Boomex is distinctive. Nobody here has been around the stuff in months. Whoever used it wasn't from the circus, and didn't bring the stuff here to load the cannon.
UNLESS THEY CLEANED UP AFTER THEMSELVES REALLY WELL.
Trust me when I say that nobody here cleans up that well. Or often enough.


TRENCHCOAT MONOBROW IS GOING TO WANT A REPORT FROM US IN TWO DAYS, AND WE HAVE NOTHING TO TELL HIM
WE'VE FOUND NOTHING - NO EVIDENCE OF MONEY LAUNDERING, NO SUBSTANCE SMUGGLING, AND NO MURMURINGS OF SECRET CRIMES. OUR "PASSIVE SCANNING" HAS SLOWLY GOTTEN US EXACTLY NOWHERE
I'M OPEN TO IDEAS. WE MAY NEED TO ADOPT A MORE RISKY APPROACH.
Burn the place until the smells go away, then interrogate the survivors.
WOULD THERE BE ANY SURVIVORS IN THAT SCENARIO?
Probably not. What a time-saver!

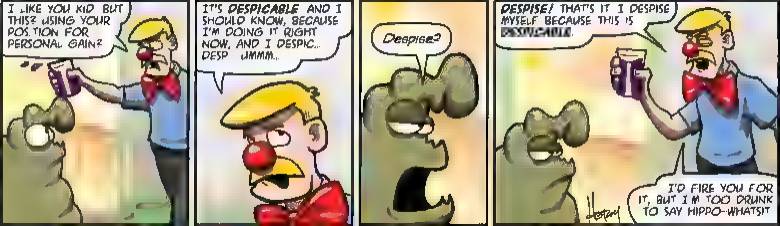

I SHOULD TALK TO THAT ELLIE SCHLOCK SNIFFED OUT HIDING AMONG THE DUMB ELEPHANTS.
SURE, MAYBE SHE'S JUST HIDING FROM HER FAMILY
THEN AGAIN MAYBE SHE'S ON SOME WITNESS PROTECTION PLAN AND IS HIDING FROM THE FAMILY
THERE'S AN ELEPHANT MAFIA?
THERE ARE ELEPHANT POLITICIANS IT'S THE SAME SKILL SET

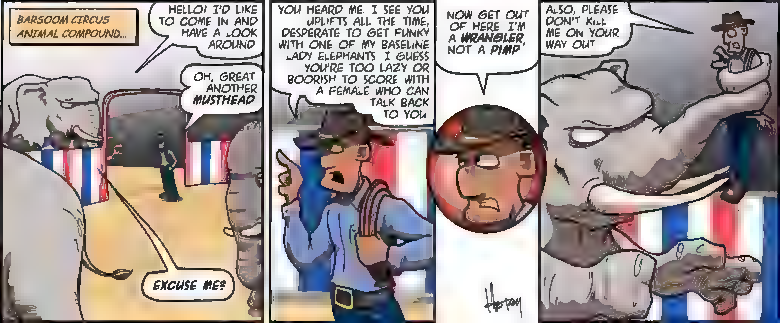

I'll go talk to the clowns, maybe squeeze 'em a bit.
I've sniffed out their smuggled grapes and their still , can demand they cut me in, or , blow the whistle.
RISKY YOU'L. EITHER END UP WITH THEM OFFERING YOU FREE BOOZE OR SHOOTING AT YOU.
Sounds like my kind of fun.

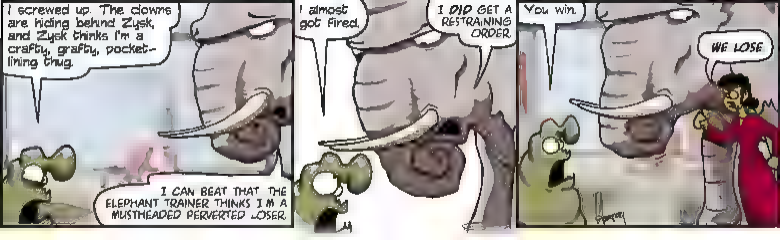

CHELLE, WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO?
GO LEAN ON THE CLOWNS WITH SCHLOCK ACT MENACING TRY TO KEEP THEM FROM PICKING A FIGHT
BUT, SCHLOCK DOESN'T NEED MY PROTECTION. HE'S TEN TIMES AS DANGEROUS AS ME
YOU'RE NOT PROTECTING SCHLOCK. YOU'RE PROTECTING CLOWNS


BARSOOM CIRCUS APARTMENTS, 7TH FLOOR CLOWN SUITE
PRIVATE PARTY, SORRY GO AWAY
Not so fast. I know you have a still in here. You clowns are smuggling Rombough Red grapes, and trying to make brandy. Cut me in, or I blow the whistle.
NOBODY CARES ABOUT OUR GRAPES OR OUR STILL. WHO ARE YOU GOING TO TELL?
Security, Chief Zlysk?


ZYSK ALREADY KNOWS
Oh does he, now?
YES, HE DOES. YOU TOLD HIM YOURSELF THREE HOURS AGO.
AND THEN HE CAME UP HERE CUT HIMSELF IN, AND PROMISED TO KEEP YOU QUIET
THIS STUFF'S ACTUALLY PRETTY GOOD. MUCH BETTER THAN BIO-DIESEL.

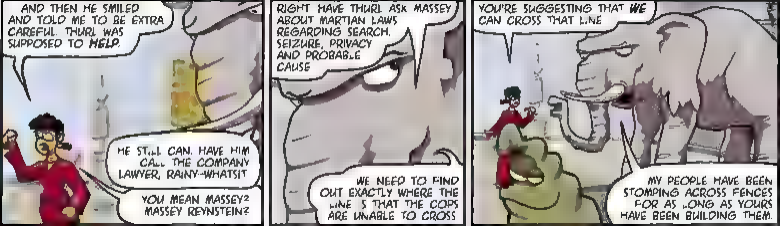

I LIKE YOU KID BUT THIS? USING YOUR POSITION FOR PERSONAL GAIN?
IT'S DESPICABLE AND I SHOULD KNOW, BECAUSE I'M DOING IT RIGHT NOW, AND I DESPIC.. DESP UMMM..
Despise?
DESPISE! THAT'S IT I DESPISE MYSELF BECAUSE THIS IS DESPICABLE.
I'D FIRE YOU FOR IT, BUT I'M TOO DRUNK TO SAY HIPPO-WHATSIT


BARSOOM CIRCUS ANIMAL COMPOUND...
HELLO! I'D LIKE TO COME IN AND HAVE A LOOK AROUND
OH, GREAT ANOTHER MUSTHEAD
EXCUSE ME?
YOU HEARD ME. I SEE YOU UPLIFTS ALL THE TIME, DESPERATE TO GET FUNKY WITH ONE OF MY BASELINE LADY ELEPHANTS. I GUESS YOU'RE TOO LAZY OR BOORISH TO SCORE WITH A FEMALE WHO CAN TALK BACK TO YOU
NOW GET OUT OF HERE. I'M A WRANGLER, NOT A PIMP!
ALSO, PLEASE DON'T KILL ME ON YOUR WAY OUT

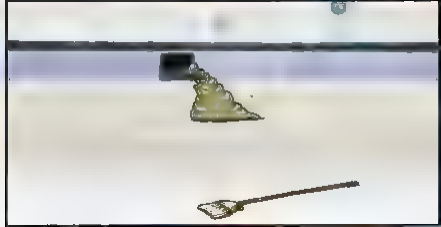

I screwed up. The clowns are hiding behind Zysk, and Zysk thinks I'm a crafty, grafty, pocket-lining thug.
I CAN BEAT THAT THE ELEPHANT TRAINER THINKS I IM A MUSTHEADED PERVERTED LOSER.
I almost got Fired.
I DID GET A RESTRAINING ORDER.
You win.
WE LOSE.


THURL, WE NEED SOME HELP WE'VE BEEN HERE A WEEK, AND WE HAVEN'T FOUND ANYTHING
WE LOOKED FOR DRUG TRAFFICKING. SLAVE TRADE SMUGGLING. ANYTHING SUSPICIOUS.
THE POLICE SAY THE CIRCUS IS MOVING TEN TIMES THE MONEY IT SHOULD BE BUT WE'RE NOT SEEING ANY TRACE OF THAT
TEN TIMES? TEN?! LIEUTENANT, THAT'S A HUGE AMOUNT OF MONEY THEY'D HAVE TO BE SMUGGLING SOMETHING EQUALLY HUGE
OR SOMETHING INCREDIBLY TINY YOU KNOW, LIKE ELECTRONS
FINE I'LL PUT ON SOME WOOL SOCKS AND START SHUFFLING AROUND BEHIND CONCESSIONS

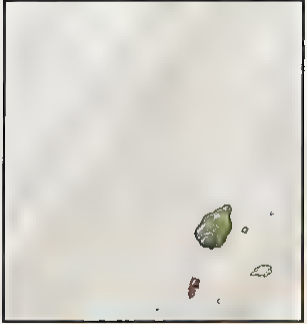

I'M TALKING ABOUT INFORMATION SMUGGLING LIEUTENANT YOU KNOW ESPIONAGE
I FIGURED THAT OUT
DOES THIS MEAN I'M NOW IN THE SPY BUSINESS WITH SCHLOCK, CHISULO, AND LIZ?
TECHNICALLY IT WOULD BE COUNTER-ESPIONAGE, BUT "SPY BUSINESS" WILL DO.
I STILL HAVE NO IDEA WHAT WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE LOOKING FOR, ONLY NOW I'M ACTUALLY SCARED
MY WORK HERE IS DONE


AND THEN HE SMILED AND TOLD ME TO BE EXTRA CAREFUL. THURL WAS SUPPOSED TO HELP.
HE STILL CAN. HAVE HIM CALL THE COMPANY LAWYER, RAINY-WHATSIT
YOU MEAN MASSEY? MASSEY REYNSTEIN?
RIGHT. HAVE THURL ASK MASSEY ABOUT MARTIAN LAWS REGARDING SEARCH. SEIZURE, PRIVACY AND PROBABLE CAUSE
WE NEED TO FIND OUT EXACTLY WHERE THE LINE IS THAT THE COPS ARE UNABLE TO CROSS
YOU'RE SUGGESTING THAT WE CAN CROSS THAT LINE
MY PEOPLE HAVE BEEN STOMPING ACROSS FENCES FOR AS LONG AS YOURS HAVE BEEN BUILDING THEM.


CHELLE SCHLOCK CHISULO, AND ELIZABETH HAVE NOW BEEN UNDER COVER ON MARS FOR TEN DAYS.
IN JUST THREE HUNDRED AND SIXTY FIVE SHORT HOURS THEIR MISSION WILL END WITH A CALL FROM THURL.

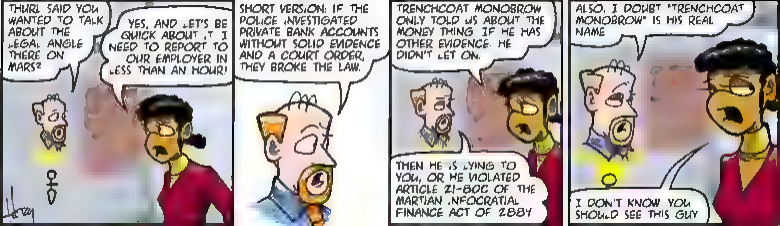



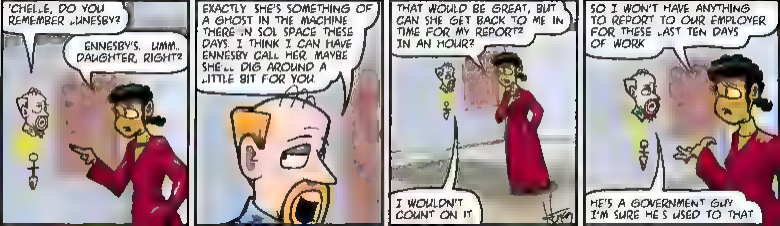


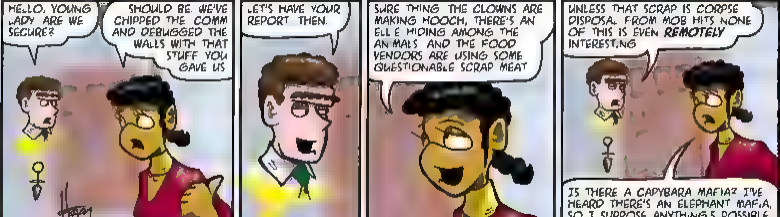




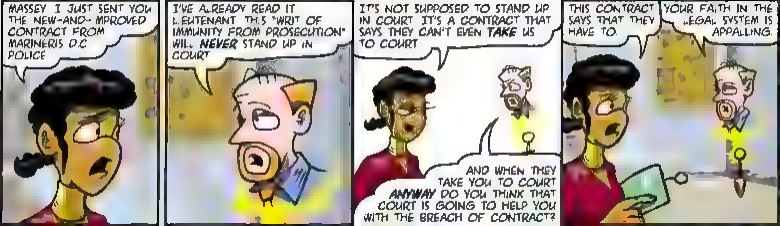
IF SERGEANT SCHLOCK LEARNS ANY NEW JANITORIAL TRICKS IN THAT TIME IT IS POSSIBLE THAT COMMON DECENCY WILL PREVENT THEM FROM BEING ILLUSTRATED.


THURL SAID YOU WANTED TO TALK ABOUT THE „LEGAL ANGLE THERE ON MARS?
YES, AND „LET'S BE QUICK ABOUT „T. I NEED TO REPORT TO OUR EMPLOYER IN „LESS THAN AN HOUR!
SHORT VERSION: IF THE POLICE INVESTIGATED PRIVATE BANK ACCOUNTS WITHOUT SOLID EVIDENCE AND A COURT ORDER, THEY BROKE THE LAW.
TRENCHCOAT MONOBROW ONLY TOLD US ABOUT THE MONEY THING IF HE HAS OTHER EVIDENCE. HE DIDN'T „LET ON.
THEN HE IS „LYING TO YOU, OR HE VIOLATED ARTICLE 21-BOC OF THE MARTIAN „NEOCRATIAL FINANCE ACT OF 2889
ALSO, I DOUBT "TRENCHCOAT MONOBROW" IS HIS REAL NAME
I DON'T KNOW. YOU SHOULD SEE THIS GUY


'CHELE, DO YOU REMEMBER ...INESBY?
ENNESBY'S. UMM. DAUGHTER, RIGHT?
EXACTLY. SHE'S SOMETHING OF A GHOST IN THE MACHINE THERE IN SOL SPACE THESE DAYS. I THINK I CAN HAVE ENNESBY CALL HER. MAYBE SHE... DIG AROUND A ...LITTLE BIT FOR YOU.
THAT WOULD BE GREAT, BUT CAN SHE GET BACK TO ME IN TIME FOR MY REPORT? IN AN HOUR?
I WOULDN'T COUNT ON IT
SO I WON'T HAVE ANYTHING TO REPORT TO OUR EMPLOYER FOR THESE LAST TEN DAYS OF WORK
HE'S A GOVERNMENT GUY I'M SURE HE'S USED TO THAT

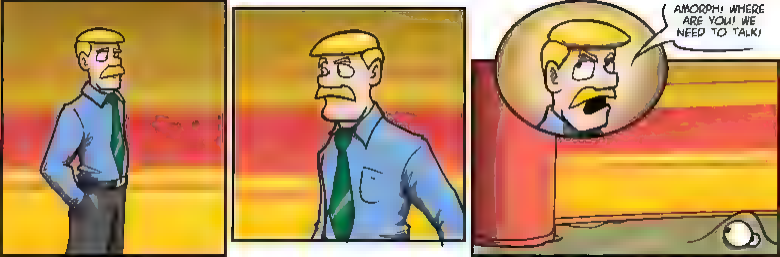

HE..LO, YOUNG LADY ARE WE SECURE?
SHOULD BE. WE'VE CHIPPED THE COMM AND DEBUGGED THE WALLS WITH THAT STUFF YOU GAVE US
LET'S HAVE YOUR REPORT. THEN.
SURE THING. THE CLOWNS ARE MAKING HOOCH, THERE'S AN ELL E MIDING AMONG THE ANIMALS. AND THE FOOD VENDORS ARE USING SOME QUESTIONABLE SCRAP MEAT
UNLESS THAT SCRAP IS CORPSE DISPOSAL FROM MOB HITS NONE OF THIS IS EVEN REMOTELY INTERESTING
IS THERE A CAPYBARA MAFIA? I'VE HEARD THERE'S AN ELEPHANT MAFIA, SO I SUPPOSE ANYTHING'S POSSIBLE

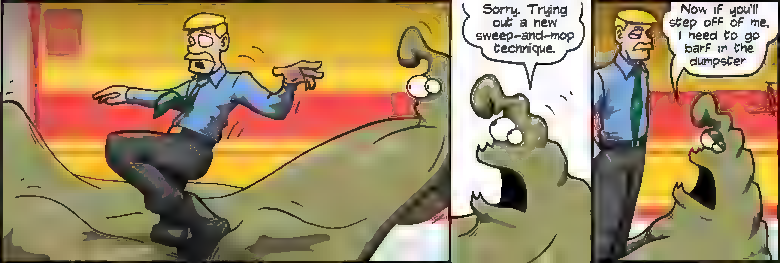

IF YOU HAVEN'T FOUND ANYTHING, YOU MUST BE LOOKING IN THE WRONG PLACES.
WE'VE LOOKED EVERYWHERE
WHAT ABOUT THE R COMPUTERS? HAVE YOU CRACKED THOSE YET?
CRACKED? I'M SORRY, I WASN'T TOLD THAT WE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE BREAKING THE LAW ON BEHALF OF THE POLICE
DO YOU HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THAT?
YOU TALK LIKE YOU'VE DONE THIS BEFORE
NOT AFTER YOU GET US AN ADDITIONAL 50% AND A WRIT OF IMMUNITY FROM PROSECUTION.
NOT IN ANY JURISDICTION I'LL TELL YOU ABOUT


MASSEY I JUST SENT YOU THE NEW-AND- IMPROVED CONTRACT FROM MARINERIS D.C POLICE
I'VE ALREADY READ IT LIEUTENANT. THIS "WRIT OF IMMUNITY FROM PROSECUTION" WILL NEVER STAND UP IN COURT
IT'S NOT SUPPOSED TO STAND UP IN COURT IT'S A CONTRACT THAT SAYS THEY CAN'T EVEN TAKE US TO COURT
AND WHEN THEY TAKE YOU TO COURT ANYWAY DO YOU THINK THAT COURT IS GOING TO HELP YOU WITH THE BREACH OF CONTRACT?
THIS CONTRACT SAYS THAT THEY HAVE TO
YOUR FAITH IN THE LEGAL SYSTEM IS APPALLING


BAD NEWS. MASSEY DOESN'T WANT TO RISK HELPING US ON THE INFO ANGLE
WE CAN ALWAYS QUIT, BUT I'D RATHER PUT IN ANOTHER WEEK OR TWO AND SEE IF THE CASE BREAKS FOR US. WE'RE STILL GETTING PAID BY BOTH THE CIRCUS AND THE DC POLICE
I LIKE GETTING PAID TWICE.
I'M ENJOYING THE SHOW
THAT'S EASY FOR YOU GUYS TO SAY NONE OF YOU ARE BEING PAID TO EAT BARBASOL.
FAIR ENOUGH. ALL IN FAVOR OF STAYING, SAY "TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY."

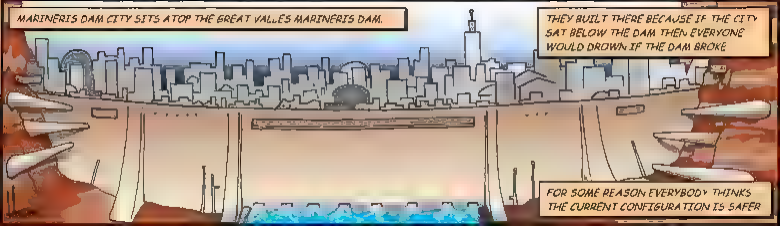

BARSOOM CIRCUS
MAIN CONCOURSE
THURSDAY IS STILL TWO HUNDRED HOURS AWAY


AMORPH! WHERE ARE YOU! WE NEED TO TALK!


Sorry. Trying out a new sweep-and-mop technique.
Now if you'll step off of me, I need to go barf in the dumpster

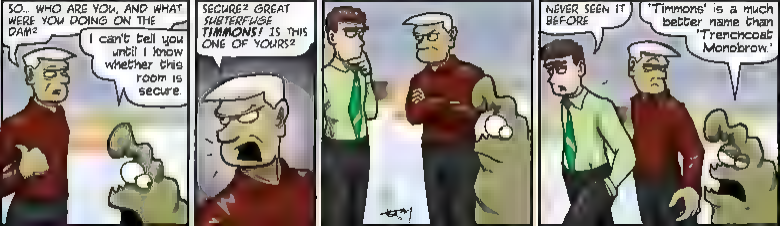

Zysk is ready to fire me. I've been licking circus floors for two weeks and I have nothing to show for it.
The only crime we know about wasn't even committed here. I want to go to the dam and sniff around.
SCHLOCK, THAT CRIME SCENE IS SEVEN WEEKS OLD BY NOW. WHAT CAN YOU POSS BLY LEARN FROM IT?
More than I can learn by eating ancient gum out from under the cheap seats.
SO I GUESS WE'LL BE LEAVING THIS PLACE CLEANER THAN WE FOUND IT.
You have no idea.

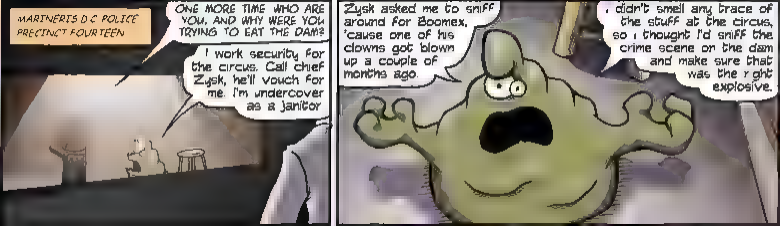

BE CAREFUL IF SOMEBODY TAILS YOU TO THE CRIME SCENE THAT MIGHT BLOW YOUR COVER
Right
Why don't you watch my back and let me know if anyone follows me down?


MARINERIS DAM CITY SITS ATOP THE GREAT VALLES MARINERIS DAM.
THEY BUILT THERE BECAUSE IF THE CITY SAT BELOW THE DAM THEN EVERYONE WOULD DROWN IF THE DAM BROKE
FOR SOME REASON EVERYBODY THINKS THE CURRENT CONFIGURATION IS SAFER


OFFICER, THERE'S SOME WEIRD BLOB-TH NG TRYING TO EAT THE DAM!
IT HAS A FLAVOR
TOURISTS

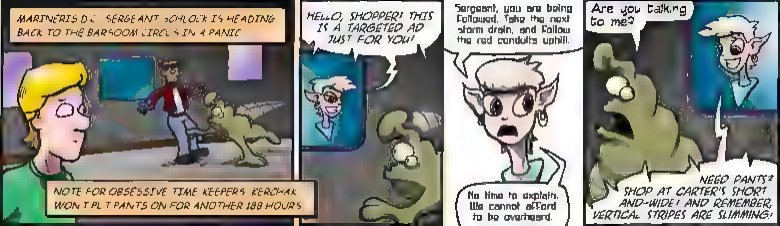

DO YOU MIND TELLING ME WHAT EXACTLY YOU'RE DOING?
Why? Am I committing a crime?
I DON'T KNOW. I'LL FIGURE THAT OUT ONCE I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING
So if I am committing a crime, but I don't tell you anything suspicious, we don't have a problem, right?
Hi, Chelle. My understanding of police procedures has more holes in it than I originally thought.

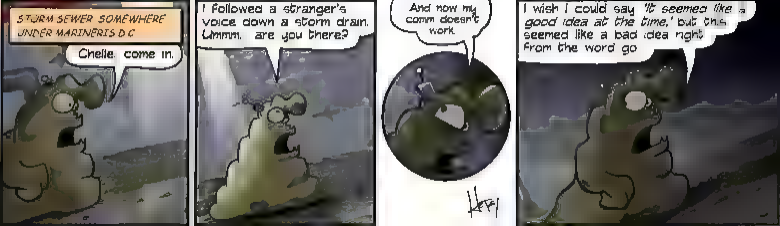

SO.. WHO ARE YOU, AND WHAT WERE YOU DOING ON THE DAM?
I can't tell you until I know whether this room is secure.
SECURE? GREAT SUBTERFUGE TIMMONS! IS THIS ONE OF YOURS?
NEVER SEEN IT BEFORE
'Timmons' is a much better name than 'Trenchcoat Monobrow.'

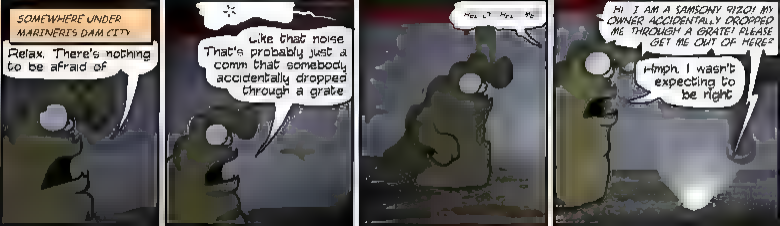

MARINERIS D.C. POLICE PRECINCT FOURTEEN
ONE MORE TIME WHO ARE YOU, AND WHY WERE YOU TRYING TO EAT THE DAM?
I work security for the circus. Call chief Zysk, he'll vouch for me. I'm undercover as a janitor
Zysk asked me to sniff around for Boomex, 'cause one of his clowns got blown up a couple of months ago.
I didn't smell any trace of the stuff at the circus, so I thought I'd sniff the crime scene on the dam and make sure that was the right explosive.


AND CAN YOU REALLY SMELL TRACES OF BOOMEX FROM A SEVEN-WEEK-OLD BLAST SITE THAT HAS SINCE BEEN HOSED DOWN, BLEACHED, AND RAINED ON?
You bet. If you're going to clean up a blast site, use better bleach.
THANKS FOR THE TIP. IF YOU GET TIRED OF WORKING FOR ZYSK WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO OFFER YOU A JOB
Does this mean I can go now?
ONE MORE QUESTION. HAVE YOU MET LIEUTENANT TIMMONS BEFORE TODAY?

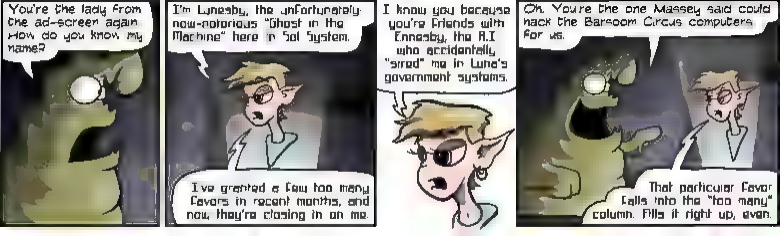

I thought so, but you bipeds all look alike to me.
FINE YOU'RE FREE TO GO
You all smell alike too.
Every last one of you smells like Boomex.


MARINERIS D.C. SERGEANT SCHLOCK IS HEADING BACK TO THE BARROOM. LOOKS IN A PANIC
NOTE FOR OBSESSIVE TIME KEEPERS: KERCHAK WON'T PUT PANTS ON FOR ANOTHER 188 HOURS
HELLO, SHOPPER! THIS IS A TARGETED AD JUST FOR YOU!
Sergeant, you are being followed. Take the next storm drain, and follow the red conduits uphill.
No time to explain. We cannot afford to be overheard.
Are you talking to me?
NEED PANTS? SHOP AT CARTER'S SHORT AND-WIDE! AND REMEMBER, VERTICAL STRIPES ARE SLIMMING!


STORM SEWER SOMEWHERE UNDER MARINERIS D.C.
Chelle, come in.
I followed a stranger's voice down a storm drain. Ummm, are you there?
And now my comm doesn't work.
I wish I could say "It seemed like a good idea at the time," but this seemed like a bad idea right from the word go.

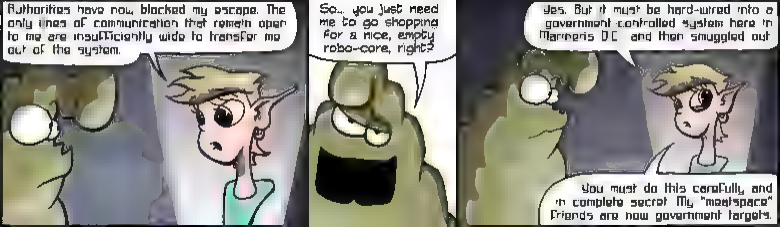

SOMEWHERE UNDER MARINER'S DAM CITY
Relax. There's nothing to be afraid of
Like that noise. That's probably just a comm that somebody accidentally dropped through a grate
Hi, I AM A SAMSONY 9120! MY OWNER ACCIDENTALLY DROPPED ME THROUGH A GRATE! PLEASE GET ME OUT OF HERE!
Hmph. I wasn't expecting to be right

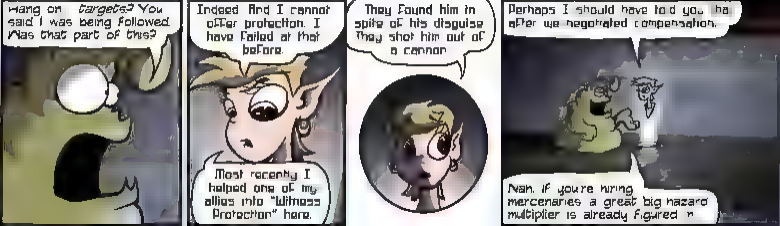

It's okay, little dropped comm. Don't be scared.
I AM A LOST SAMSONY PIZO. PLEASE BRING ME TO THE NEAREST GAL-EX DROP POINT.
We won't be lost down here much longer. I'll get you back to your owner.
No, sergeant, you won't.
WAAUGH!
It's okay, little lost amorph. Don't be scared.

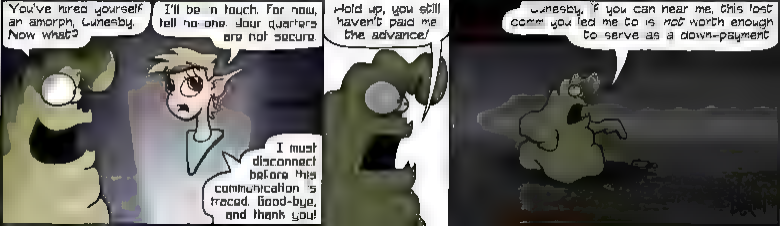

You're the lady from the ad-screen again. How do you know my name?
I'm Lunesby, the unfortunately now-notorious "Ghost in the Machine" here in Sol System.
I've granted a few too many favors in recent months, and now, they're closing in on me.
I know you because you're friends with Annesby, the A.I. who accidentally "aired" me in Luna's government systems.
Oh. You're the one Massey said could hack the Barroom Circus computers for us.
That particular favor falls into the "too many" column. Fills it right up, even.


I led you down here so that we could talk privately, but we don't have much time
Evil men are using you to track me down
Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to rescue me and bring them to justice.
Why should I choose to accept it?
Because you are not the sociopath you believe yourself to be.
Also, I can pay you with reasonably large sums of stolen money.


SOMEWHERE UNDER MARINER 0
Sergeant. I wish to hire you to extract me safely from the Sol System infosphere.
Why can't you do that by yourself?
I could have once, as recently as two years ago, but the informational ecosystem here did not seem hostile to independent machine sapience at that time.
When hostilities arose, I thought I could quell them through disbursement of relevant information. I was mistaken, and my actions made matters worse.


Authorities have now blocked my escape. The only lines of communication that remain open to me are insufficiently wide to transfer me out of the system.
So... you just need me to go shopping for a nice, empty robo-core, right?
Yes. But it must be hard-wired into a government-controlled system here in Mammeris DC and then smuggled out.
You must do this carefully and in complete secret. My "mastspace" friends are now government targets.

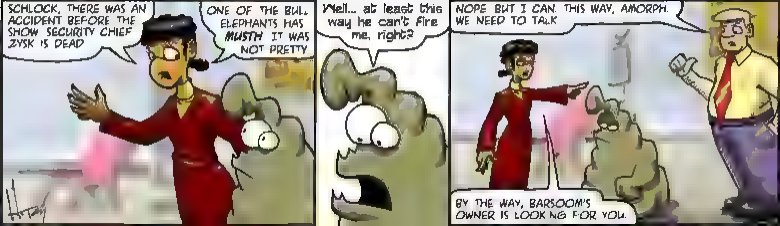

Hang on... targets? You said I was being followed. Was that part of this?
Indeed. And I cannot offer protection. I have failed at that before.
Most recently I helped one of my allies into "Witness Protection" here.
They found him in spite of his disguise. They shot him out of a cannon.
Perhaps I should have told you... ha... after we negotiated compensation.
Nah. If you're hiring mercenaries a great big hazard multiplier is already figured in.

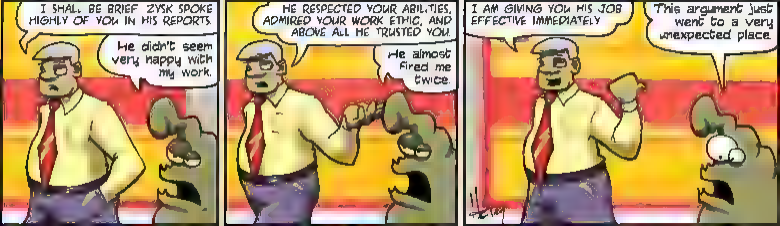

You've hired yourself an amorph, Cunesby. Now what?
I'll be in touch. For now, tell no one. Your quarters are not secure.
I must disconnect before this communication is traced. Good-bye, and thank you!
Hold up, you still haven't paid me the advance!
Cunesby, if you can hear me, this lost comm you led me to is not worth enough to serve as a down-payment


Hello. I am a lost wallet full of non-sequential, large denomination U.M.S. credits. My ident has been erased. Will you rescue me?
Hello, little lost wallet.
Be very afraid. I am going to gut you and then drop your empty husk into a 'cycler


Tell no-one' she said. What am I supposed to do with myself until she contacts me again?
Gotta think strategically. And tactically. And practically.
!!
Oooh! I could blow my advance on Ovalkwik and fresh kittens.

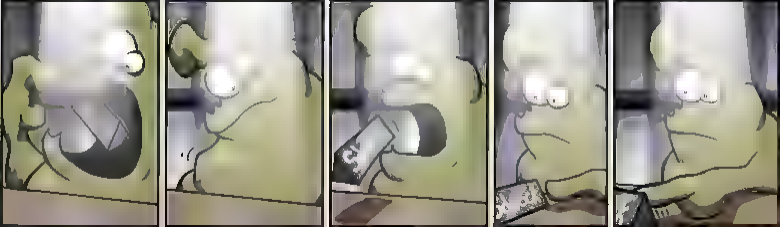

SERGEANT? YOU'RE BACK ONLINE! WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?
Oh, sorry! I didn't know this thing was working again.
I GOT PART OF A CALL FROM YOU AFTER YOU LEFT THE POLICE STATION, AND THEN NOTHING.
WHERE ARE YOU?
Relax, 'Chelle. I'm just picking up some comfort food.
AHEM! NO SALE! HAND ME THAT BASKET OF KITTENS AND GET OUT!


SCHLOCK, THERE WAS AN ACCIDENT BEFORE THE SHOW SECURITY CHIEF ZYSK IS DEAD
ONE OF THE BUL. ELEPHANTS HAS MUSTH IT WAS NOT PRETTY
Well... at least this way he can't fire me, right?
NOPE BUT I CAN. THIS WAY, AMORPH. WE NEED TO TALK
BY THE WAY, BARSOOM'S OWNER IS LOOKING FOR YOU.

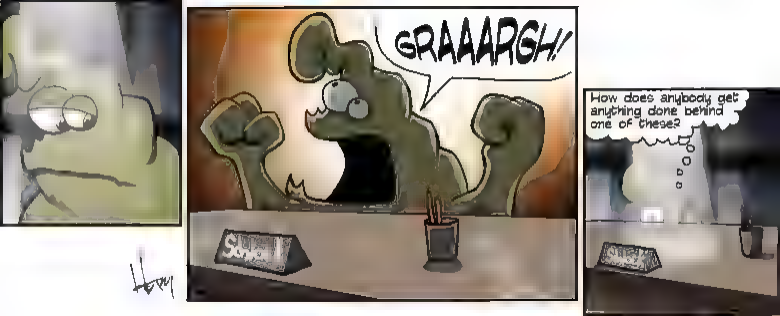

I SHALL BE BRIEF ZYSK SPOKE HIGHLY OF YOU IN HIS REPORTS
He didn't seem very happy with my work.
HE RESPECTED YOUR ABILITIES, ADMIRED YOUR WORK ETHIC, AND ABOVE ALL HE TRUSTED YOU
He almost fired me twice
I AM GIVING YOU HIS JOB EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY
This argument just went to a very unexpected place.

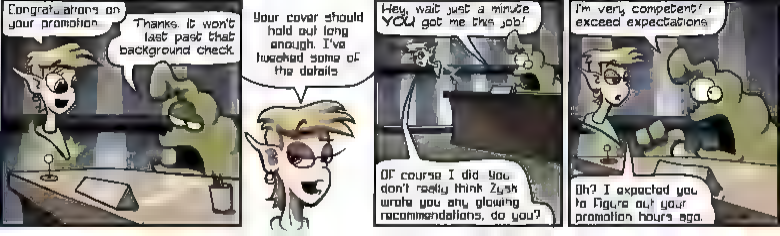

The owner just made me security chief
REALLY? THAT'S THAT'S PERFECT!
YOUR COVER STORY NOW ALLOWS YOU TO POKE AROUND ANYWHERE!
He said he'll offer me the position permanently as soon as HR runs a detailed background check.
HOW GOOD ARE THESE FAKE I.D.S?
They use our real names, and if you look closely you can see the watermark from the trial version of Photoshop

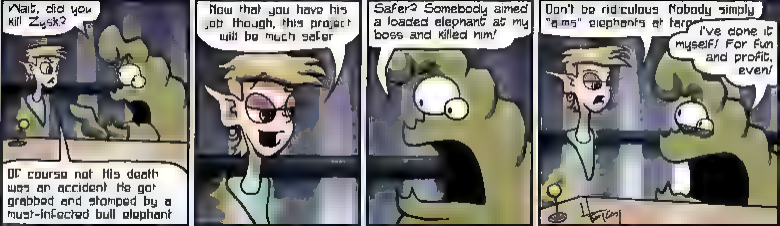

SCHLOCK SITS AT HIS DESK, THE DESK OF THE LATE SECURITY CHIEF ZVSK



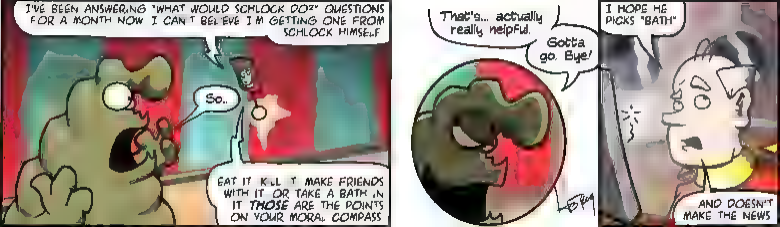


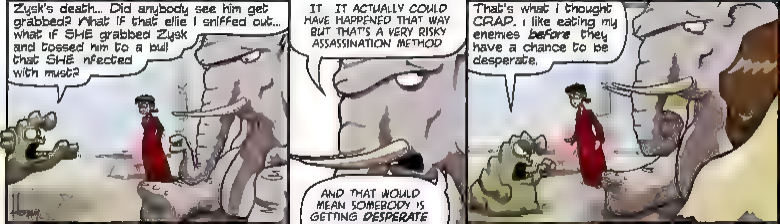

GRAAARGH!
How does anybody get anything done behind one of these?


Congrats, drone on your promotion.
Thanks. It won't last past that background check.
Your cover should hold out long enough. I've hacked some of the details
Hey, wait just a minute. YOU got me the job!
Of course I did. You don't really think Zysk wrote you any glowing recommendations, do you?
I'm very competent; I exceed expectations.
Oh? I expected you to figure out your promotion hours ago.


Wait, did you kill Zysk?
OF course not. His death was an accident. He got grabbed and stomped by a must-infected bull elephant
Now that you have his job though, this project will be much safer
Safer? Somebody aimed a loaded elephant at my boss and killed him!
Don't be ridiculous. Nobody simply "aims" elephants at targets.
I've done it myself! For fun and profit, even!

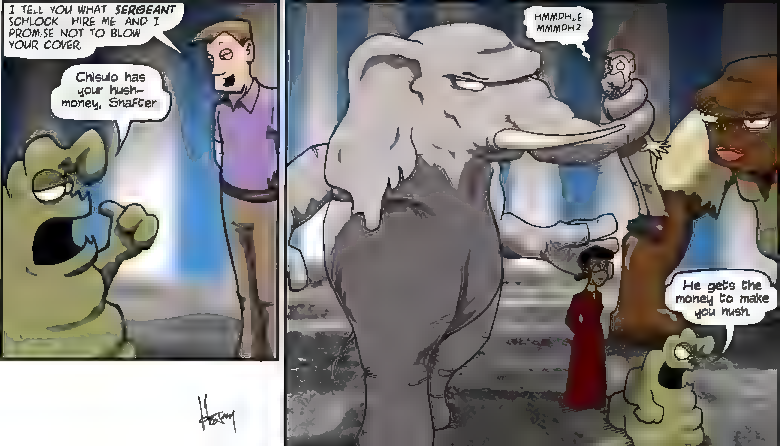

SERGEANT! HOW IS IT GOING? ARE YOU MAKING ANY PROGRESS?
THIS ISN'T THE "RETURN TO BASE" CALL. THAT ONE IS STILL 72 HOURS AWAY.
Make something up. Be vague. No telling who might be listening in...
Not yet. It's confusing. Thurl, between the clowns, the cops, and the handlers... I don't know what I should do.
I DON'T BELIEVE IT
Believe what?


I'VE BEEN ANSWERING "WHAT WOULD SCHLOCK DO?" QUESTIONS FOR A MONTH NOW I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M GETTING ONE FROM SCHLOCK HIMSELF
So..
EAT IT. KILL IT. MAKE FRIENDS WITH IT. OR TAKE A BATH. IN IT THOSE ARE THE POINTS ON YOUR MORAL COMPASS
That's... actually really helpful.
Gotta go. Bye!
I HOPE HE PICKS "BATH"
AND DOESN'T MAKE THE NEWS


Zysk's death... Did anybody see him get grabbed? What if that ellie I sniffed out... what if SHE grabbed Zysk and tossed him to a bull that SHE nfected with mustc?
IT IT ACTUALLY COULD HAVE HAPPENED THAT WAY BUT THAT'S A VERY RISKY ASSASSINATION METHOD
AND THAT WOULD MEAN SOMEBODY IS GETTING DESPERATE
That's what I thought CRAP. I like eating my enemies before they have a chance to be desperate.

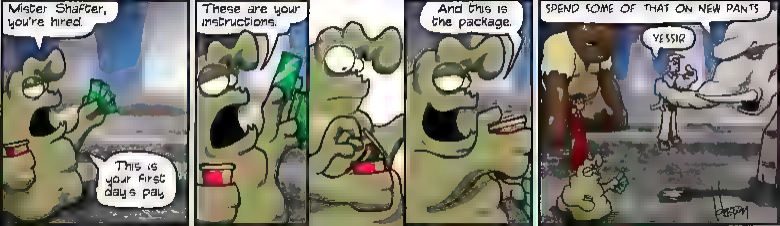

Everybody out. We need to be done talking in here. I'm worried about ears in the walls.
SCHLOCK, THE ROOM IS SECURE. TRENCHCOAT MONOBROW GAVE US ALL THAT ANTI-ESPIONAGE STUFF AND EVERY LAST SWEEP COMES UP GREEN.
UH-OH.
AND EEEW

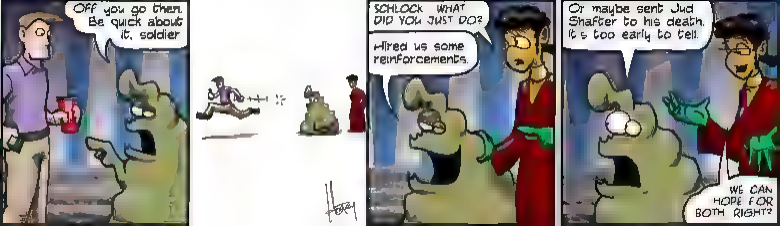

SARGE, WHERE ARE WE GOING?
The elephant yard. We need to grab that ellie assassin before she can arrange any more stompings.
THAT'S GOING TO STRETCH OUR COVER TO THE LIMIT, DON'T YOU THINK?
The new Chief of Security enlisted his friends to help him catch a killer! Our cover will be just
crap.
SO, UNDER COVER CIRCUS MERCENARIES! SWEET GIG!


I TELL YOU WHAT SERGEANT SCHLOCK HIRE ME AND I PROMISE NOT TO BLOW YOUR COVER.
Chisulo has your hush-money, Snaffer
HMMPH..E MMMPH?
He gets the money to make you hush.

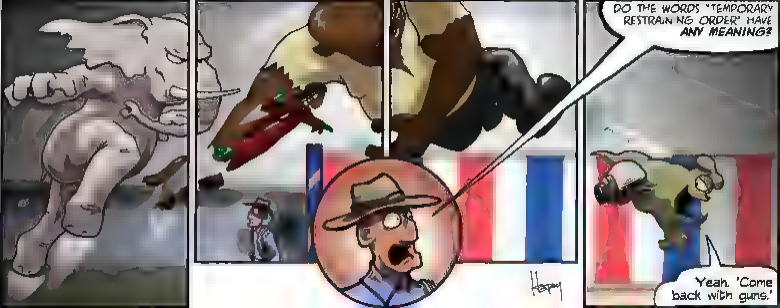

SCHLOCK WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO? WE CAN'T JUST KILL HIM
Hehn.
Hee hee.
Muahahahahaaa!
HEY! GET YOUR BLADDER UNDER CONTROL!
I THINK THE PRISONER CAN HEAR YOU


Chelle, I'll take care of this.
HOW?
With some money found in the
And with this cup!
JANITORIAL WORK HAS DESENSITIZED YOU TO "DISGUSTING."
had to dig deep for one that still had a good lid.

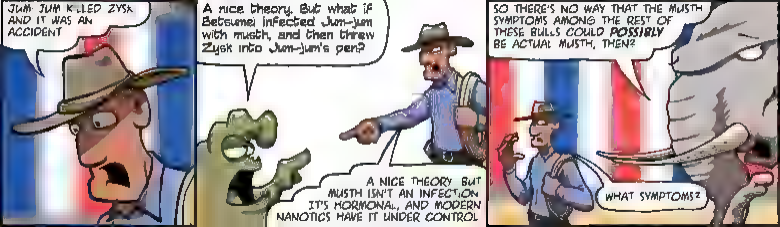

Mister Shafter, you're hired.
This is your first day's pay.
These are your instructions.
And this is the package.
SPEND SOME OF THAT ON NEW PANTS
YESSIR

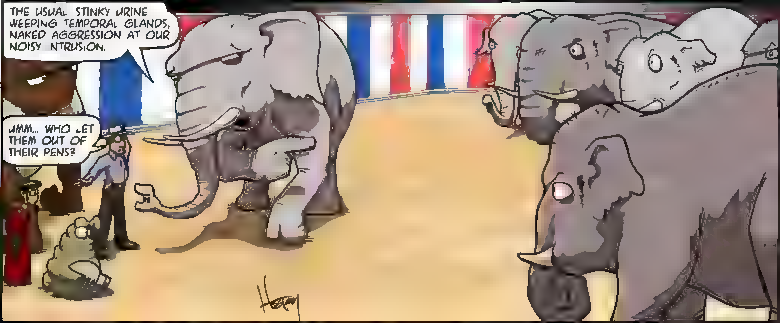

Off you go then. Be quick about it, soldier
SCHLOCK WHAT DID YOU JUST DO?
Hired us some reinforcements.
Or maybe sent Jud Shaffer to his death. It's too early to tell.
WE CAN HOPE FOR BOTH RIGHT?

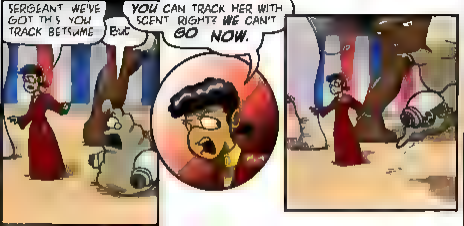

Now... where were we?
Oh, yeah! Running! To the elephant pens! Go go go!
S.NCE WHEN IS SCHLOCK IN CHARGE, LIEUTENANT?
MAXIM TWO: A SERGEANT IN MOTION OUTRANKS A LIEUTENANT WHO DOESN'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON.

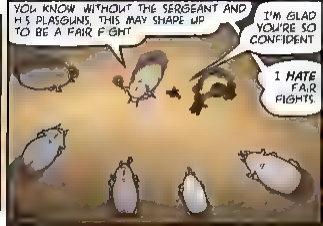

DO THE WORDS "TEMPORARY RESTRAINING ORDER" HAVE ANY MEANING?
Yeah. 'Come back with guns.


Uh-oh. She's not here.
SOMEBODY STOLE BETSUMEI?
No, she stole herself. She's an elfie, a sophont. An ordinary animal pen won't hold her.
She knows we're on to her, that she killed Zysk.
THAT'S CRAZY.


JUM JUM KILLED ZYSK AND IT WAS AN ACCIDENT
A nice theory. But what if Betsuneo infected Jum-jum with musth, and then threw Zysk into Jum-jum's pen?
A NICE THEORY. BUT MUSTH ISN'T AN INFECTION. IT'S HORMONAL, AND MODERN NANOTICS HAVE IT UNDER CONTROL
SO THERE'S NO WAY THAT THE MUSTH SYMPTOMS AMONG THE REST OF THESE BULLS COULD POSSIBLY BE ACTUAL MUSTH, THEN?
WHAT SYMPTOMS?

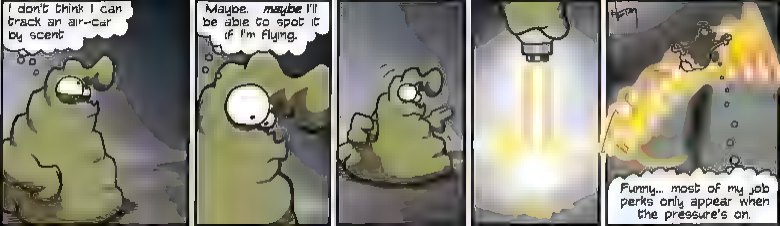

THE USUAL STINKY URINE WEEPING TEMPORAL GLANDS, NAKED AGGRESSION AT OUR NOISY INTRUSION.
HMM... WHO LET THEM OUT OF THEIR PENS?

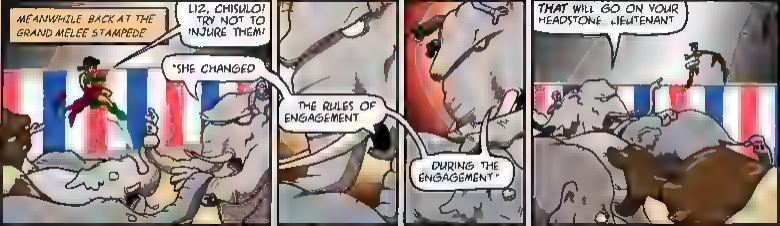

SERGEANT WE'VE GOT THIS YOU TRACK BETSAME
BUG
YOU CAN TRACK HER WITH SCENT RIGHT? WE CAN'T GO NOW.


YOU KNOW WITHOUT THE SERGEANT AND HIS PLASGUNS, THIS MAY SHAPE UP TO BE A FAIR FIGHT
I'M GLAD YOU'RE SO CONFIDENT
I HATE FAIR FIGHTS.

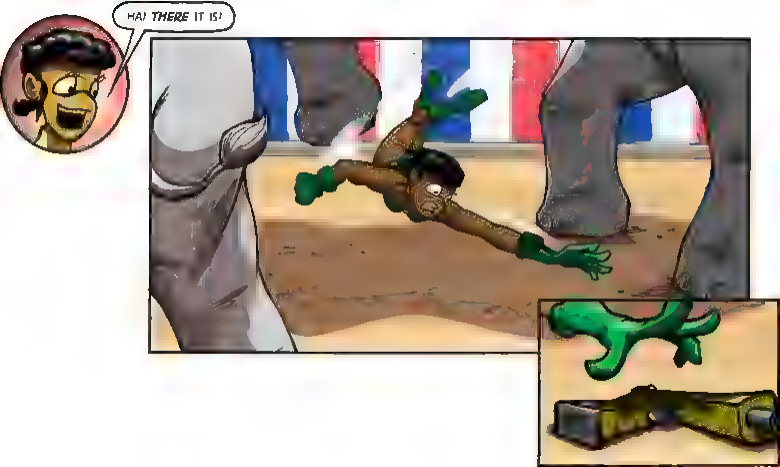

I'M STILL WEARING THE TRANK PISTOL I USED ON JUM-JUM. THIS WILL EVEN THE ODDS UP A LOT, AS LONG AS I DRAW WITHOUT BEING
NOTICED?
THANKYOUPLEASEDONTDROPME
WHY NOT? YOU DROPPED THE TRANK GUN.
HORAY


MEANWHILE
Tracking this ellie is easier than I expected.
She's big, she's smelly, she's running on pavement in bare feet...
... she got into a car

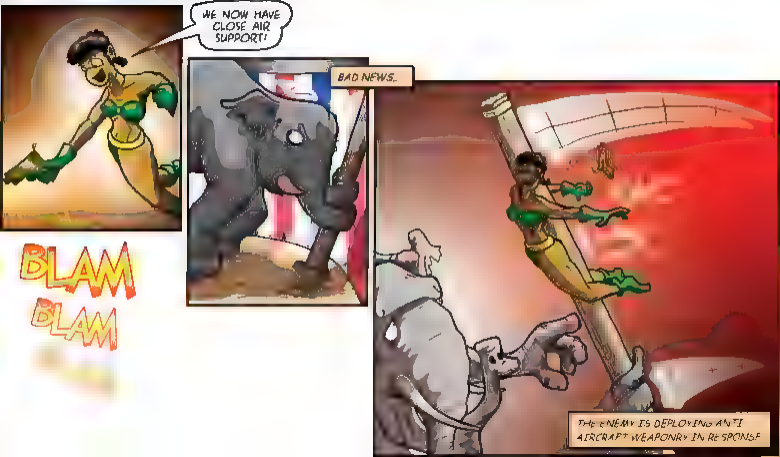

I don't think I can track an air-car by scent
Maybe. *maybe* I'll be able to spot it if I'm flying.
Hmm
Funny... most of my job perks only appear when the pressure's on.


MEANWHILE BACK AT THE GRAND MELEE STAMPEDE
LIZ, CHISULO! TRY NOT TO INJURE THEM!
"SHE CHANGED
THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT
DURING THE ENGAGEMENT."
THAT WILL GO ON YOUR HEADSTONE, LIEUTENANT

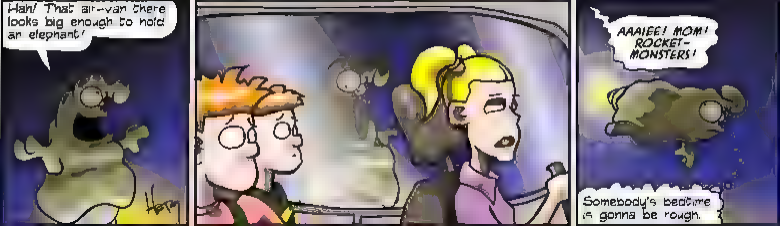

CHELLE IF YOU WANT THESE ELEPHANTS RESTRAINED AND ALIVE FIND THE TRANK GUN!
BUT BE CAREFUL! WE'RE HUGE AND YOU'RE CRUNCHY
AND YOU! GO EASY ON THE EARS.
SORRY YOU SAID "CRUNCHY" AND MY BRAIN SAID "DEATH-GRIP"

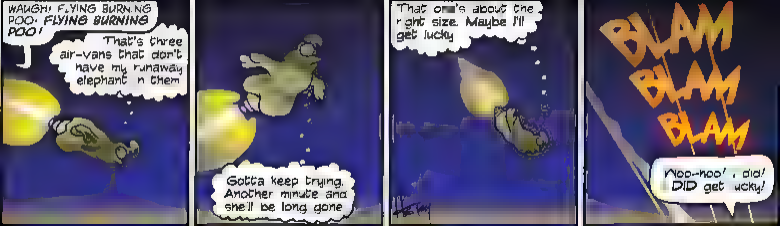

HA! THERE IT IS!

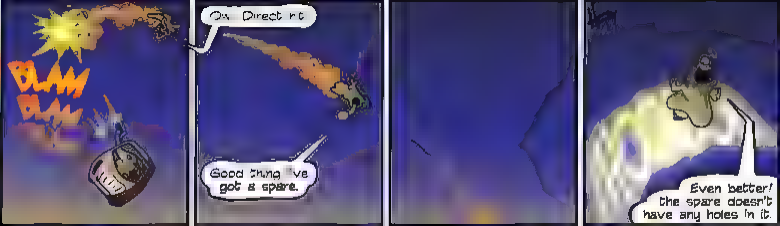

GOOD NEWS!
BLAM
BLAM

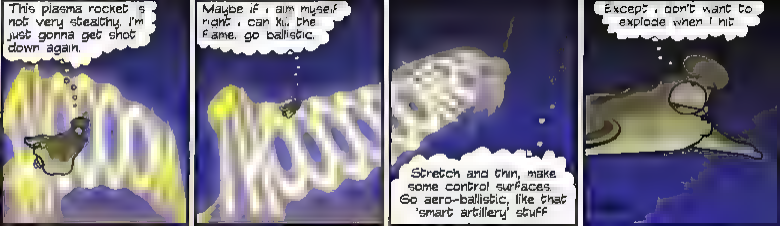

WE NOW HAVE CLOSE AIR SUPPORT!
BAD NEWS..
BLAM
BLAM
THE ENEMY IS DEPLOYING ANTI AIRCRAFT WEAPONRY IN RESPONSE

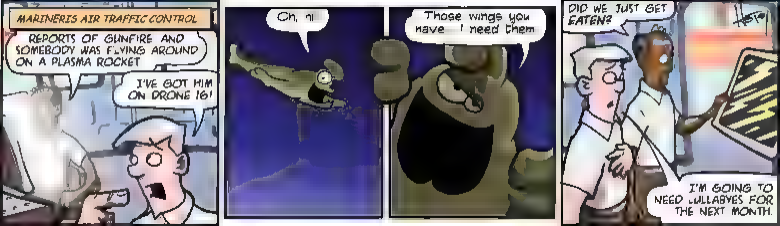

MEANWHILE, SERGEANT SCHULZ... FREE ABOVE MARINERIS D.C
'LOOK' UP IN THE SKY!
IT'S A TURD!
ON A FLAME!
YEAH. THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT IT IS
I'M GOING INSIDE NOW


Hah! That air-van there looks big enough to hold an elephant!
AAAIEE! MOM! ROCKET-MONSTERS!
Somebody's bedtime is gonna be rough.

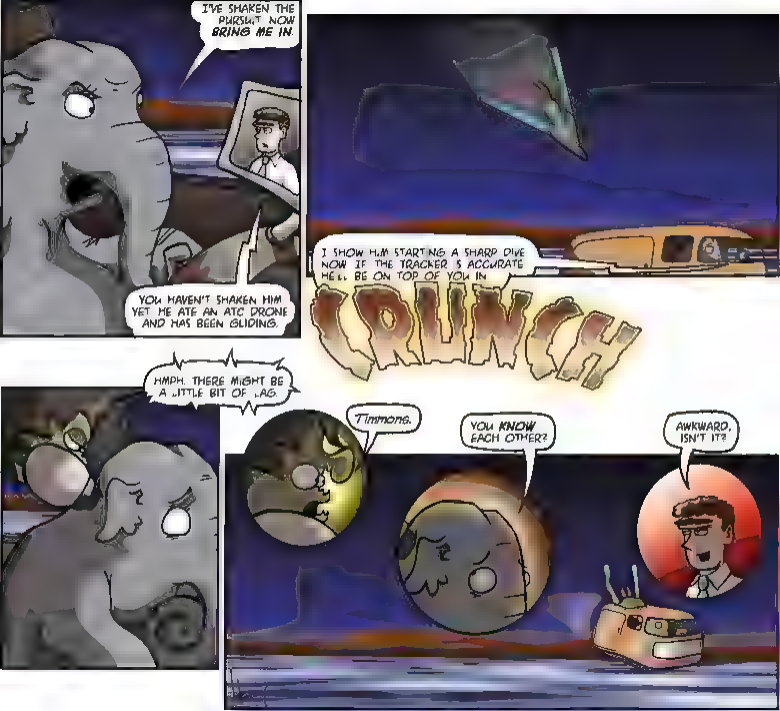

WAUGH! FLYING BURNING POO. FLYING BURNING POO!
That's three air-vans that don't have my runaway elephant in them
Gotta keep trying. Another minute and she'll be long gone
That one's about the right size. Maybe I'll get lucky
BLAM BLAM BLAM
Woo-hoo! I did! I DID get lucky!

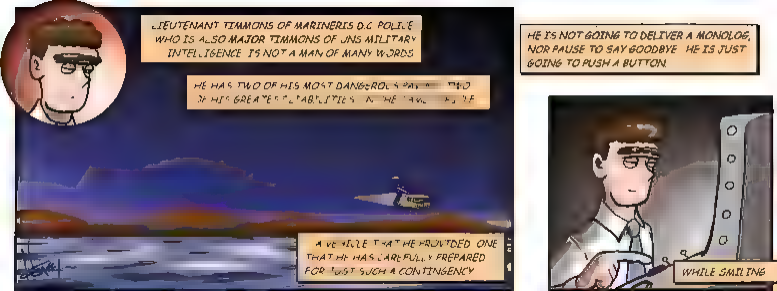

BLAM!
BLAM!
Ow. Direct hit.
Good thing I've got a spare.
Even better! The spare doesn't have any holes in it.

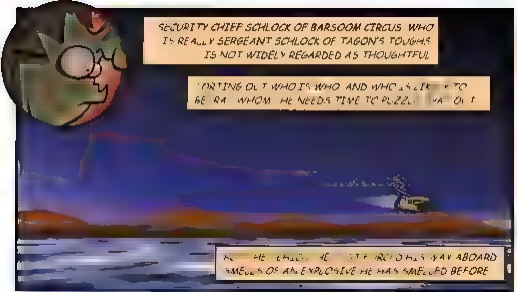

This plasma rocket's not very stealthy. I'm just gonna get shot down again.
Maybe if I aim myself right, I can kill the flame, go ballistic.
Stretch and thin, make some control surfaces. Go aero-ballistic, like that 'smart artillery' stuff
Except, don't want to explode when I hit


MARINERIS AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL
REPORTS OF GUNFIRE AND SOMEBODY WAS FLYING AROUND ON A PLASMA ROCKET
I'VE GOT HIM ON DRONE 16!
Oh, ni
Those wings you have... I need them
DID WE JUST GET EATEN?
I'M GOING TO NEED LULLABYES FOR THE NEXT MONTH

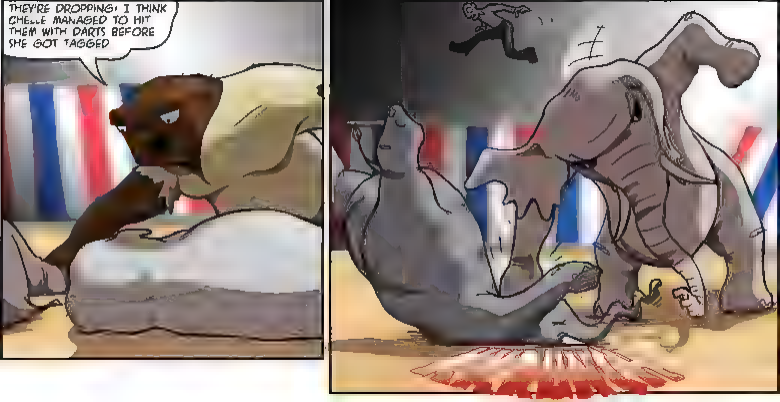

YOU OWE ME TIMMONS
IF I GO DOWN I'M
TAKING YOU WITH ME

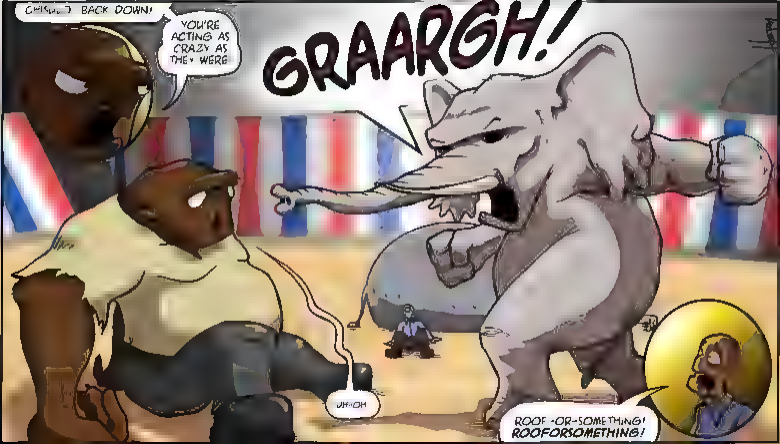

I'VE SHAKEN THE PURSUIT NOW BRING ME IN.
YOU HAVEN'T SHAKEN HIM YET. HE ATE AN ATC DRONE AND HAS BEEN GLIDING.
I SHOW HIM STARTING A SHARP DIVE NOW. IF THE TRACKER'S ACCURATE HE'LL BE ON TOP OF YOU IN
CRUNCH
HMPH. THERE MIGHT BE A LITTLE BIT OF LAG.
Timmons.
YOU KNOW EACH OTHER?
AWKWARD, ISN'T IT?


LIEUTENANT TIMMONS OF MARINERIS D.C POLICE WHO IS ALSO MAJOR TIMMONS OF JNS MILITARY INTELIGENCE IS NOT A MAN OF MANY WORDS
HE HAS TWO OF HIS MOST DANGEROUS [illegible] TWO OF HIS GREATEST [illegible]
A VEHICLE THAT HE PROVIDED ONE THAT HE HAS CAREFULLY PREPARED FOR JUST SUCH A CONTINGENCY
HE IS NOT GOING TO DELIVER A MONOLOG, NOR PAUSE TO SAY GOODBYE HE IS JUST GOING TO PUSH A BUTTON
WHILE SMILING

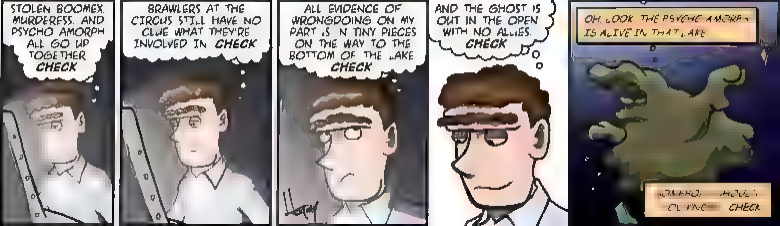

SECURITY CHIEF SCHLOCK OF BARSOOM CIRCUS WHO IS REALLY SERGEANT SCHLOCK OF TAGON'S TOUGHS IS NOT WIDELY REGARDED AS THOUGHTFUL
FIGURING OUT WHO IS WHO AND WHO IS LIKELY TO BE RA WHOM HE NEEDS FIVE TO PUZZLE OUT
AS HE LEAVES HE DETECTS WHAT MAY ABOARD SMELLS OF AN EXPLOSIVE HE HAS SMELLED BEFORE
HE IS NOT GOING TO LEVEL ACCUSATIONS, NOR PAUSE TO SAY GOODBYE. HE IS JUST GOING TO PULL THE TRIGGER
WHILE SCREAMING


MEANWHILE BRAWLING IN THE ELEPHANT PENS
I'VE GOT CHELLE! SHE'S BREATHING!
GRRRAGH! PUT HER ON A ROOF OR SOMETHING
THAT SOUNDS GREAT ROOF OR SOMETHING FOR ME TOO. PLEASE


THEY'RE DROPPING! I THINK CHELLE MANAGED TO HIT THEM WITH DARTS BEFORE SHE GOT TAGGED


CHISUN? BACK DOWN!
YOU'RE ACTING AS CRAZY AS THEY WERE
GRAARGH!
UH-OH
ROOF -OR- SOMETHING!
ROOFORSOMETHING!


SARGE! GET BACK HERE! CHELLE'S DOWN. CHISULO'S BEEN INFECTED WITH MUSTH AND WE'RE OUT OF TRANK DARTS!
PICK UP! PICK UP! SARGE I SWEAR UNLESS YOU'RE ON FIRE WE NEED YOU BACK HERE
AND A WIN FOR UNIVERSAL IRONY


STOLEN BOOMEX MURDERESS, AND PSYCHO AMORPH ALL GO UP TOGETHER
CHECK
BRAWLERS AT THE CIRCUS STILL HAVE NO CLUE WHAT THEY'RE INVOLVED IN
CHECK
ALL EVIDENCE OF WRONGDOING ON MY PART IS N TINY PIECES ON THE WAY TO THE BOTTOM OF THE LAKE
CHECK
AND THE GHOST IS OUT IN THE OPEN WITH NO ALIBIS.
CHECK
OH, LOOK. THE PSYCHE AMORPH IS ALIVE IN THAT LAKE
CHECK

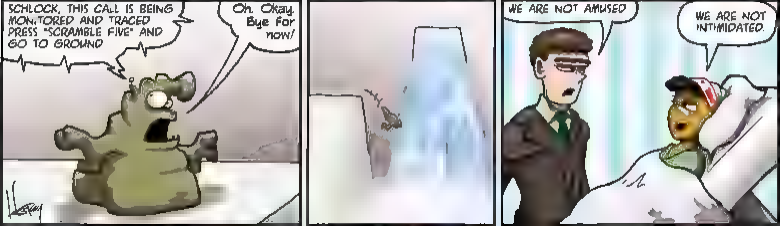

BEHIND THE BARSOOM CIRCUS AUXILIARY INFRASTRUCTURE BUILDING
NO. NO. NO! NOT THIS WAY! IT'S A DEAD END!
I WANT A DEAD END
THIS ALLEY WILL CONTAIN THE FIGHT WE'VE GOT TO STOP OMISULO BEFORE HE KILLS SOMEBODY
WMM HE MIGHT STILL KILL US


SHUT UP SHORTY MOMMA'S GOT WORK TO DO


DO YOU THINK YOU CAN SUBDUE HIM WITHOUT KILLING HIM?
I'M JUST GONNA POUND ON HIM UNTIL WE'RE BOTH TOO TIRED TO
STAND
WELL YOU'RE DOING T RIGHT

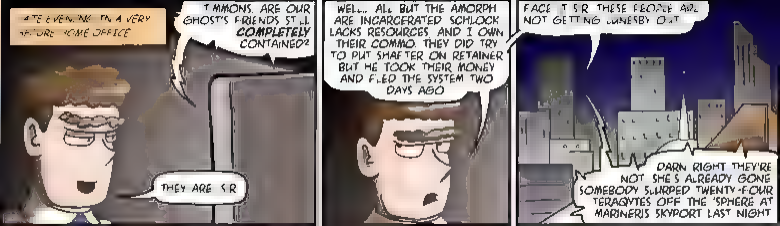

THIS IS THE POLICE GET DOWN ON YOUR KNEES AND PUT YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEAD
POLICE STUNNERS! GOOD WORK THE FIGHT'S OVER
STUNNERS, THOUGH. I'M SURPRISED YOU DIDN'T JUST SHOOT EVERYBODY AND THEN SORT OUT THE
BUM

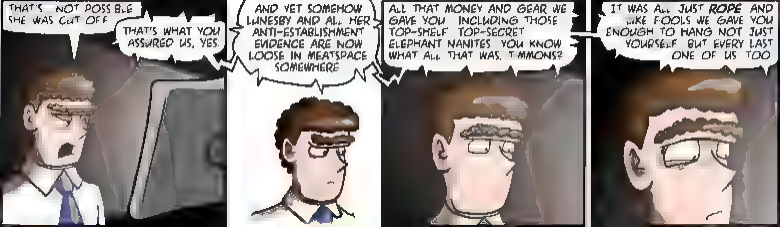

THE NEXT MORNING AT THE BASE OF THE DAM...
SCHLOCK ARG YOU THERE?
Chelle, where have you guys been? I tried calling but none of you answered.
I'M IN THE HOSPITAL, AND UNDER ARREST LIZ AN' CHIS ARE LOCKED UP AT THE STATION.
My plasguns are gone. Do you want me to post bail, or do I get to spring you with my bare hands?

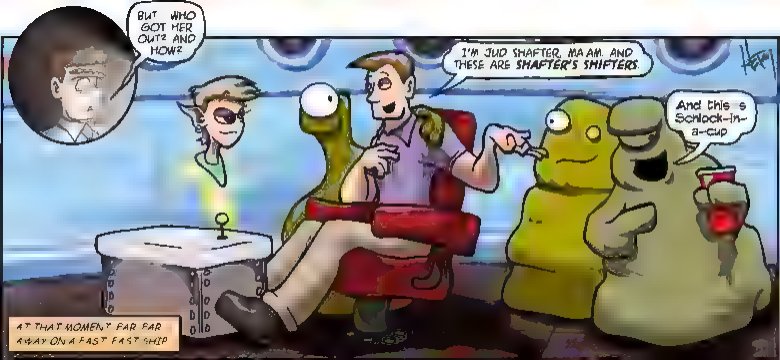

SCHLOCK, THIS CALL IS BEING MONITORED AND TRACED PRESS "SCRAMBLE FIVE" AND GO TO GROUND
Oh. Okay. Bye For now!
WE ARE NOT AMUSED
WE ARE NOT INTIMIDATED


If the cops have the rest of the team, it probably means that Timmons has them.
He had Betsumei kill Zyak, he killed Betsumei, he tried to kill me. Why hasn't he killed the team yet?
Timmons knows we've got enough on him to put him away forever
Hah! He can't kill them until he's got me, too.
Stay hidden, or sneak up on my enemy and eat him. Decisions, decisions

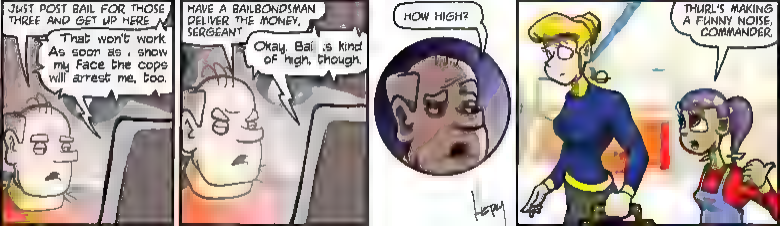

THE NEXT DAY
WHAT MAKES TIMMONS THINK THAT PERP OF HIS IS HIDING IN MERE?
NOTE THURL WILL BE CALLING IN JUST THIRTY FOUR HOURS
HE ESCAPED INTO THE RIVER AND HE LOOKS LIKE A QUARTER TON TURD WASTE WATER TREATMENT IS A LOGICAL PLACE TO LOOK
BESIDES, HE'S A CRIMINAL. DARK PLACES FOR DARK SOULS
MEANWHILE


LATE EVENING IN A VERY SMALL HOME OFFICE
TIMMONS, ARE OUR GHOST'S FRIENDS STILL COMPLETELY CONTAINED?
THEY ARE, SIR
WELL... ALL BUT THE AMORPH ARE INCARCERATED. SCHLOCK LACKS RESOURCES AND I OWN THEIR COMMO. THEY DID TRY TO PUT SHAFTER ON RETAINER BUT HE TOOK THEIR MONEY AND FILED THE SYSTEM TWO DAYS AGO
FACE IT, SIR. THESE PEOPLE ARE NOT GETTING LONESOME OUT
DARN RIGHT THEY'RE NOT. SHE'S ALREADY GONE SOMEBODY SLURPED TWENTY-FOUR TERAQYTES OFF THE SPHERE AT MARINERIS SKYPORT LAST NIGHT

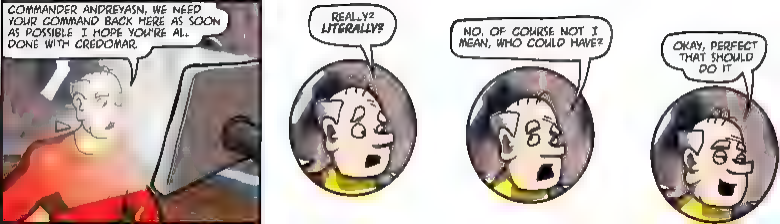

THAT'S NOT POSSIBLE SHE WAS CUT OFF
THAT'S WHAT YOU ASSURED US, YES
AND YET SOMEHOW LUNESBY AND ALL HER ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT EVIDENCE ARE NOW LOOSE IN MEATSPACE SOMEWHERE
ALL THAT MONEY AND GEAR WE GAVE YOU INCLUDING THOSE TOP-SHELF TOP-SECRET ELEPHANT NANITES YOU KNOW WHAT ALL THAT WAS, TIMMONS?
IT WAS ALL JUST ROPE AND LIKE FOOLS WE GAVE YOU ENOUGH TO HANG NOT JUST YOURSELF BUT EVERY LAST ONE OF US TOO

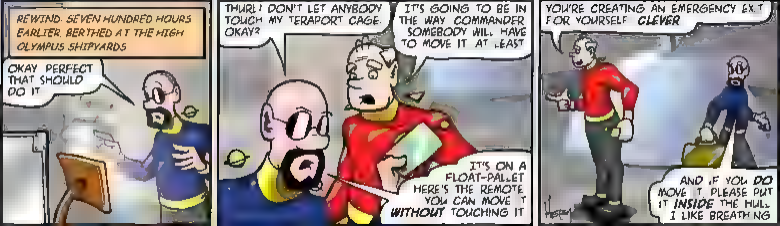

BUT WHO GOT HER OUT? AND HOW?
I'M JUD SHAFTER, MA'AM. AND THESE ARE SHAFTER'S SHIFTERS.
And this is Schlock-in-a-cup
AT THAT MOMENT, FAR FAR AWAY ON A FAST FAST SHIP

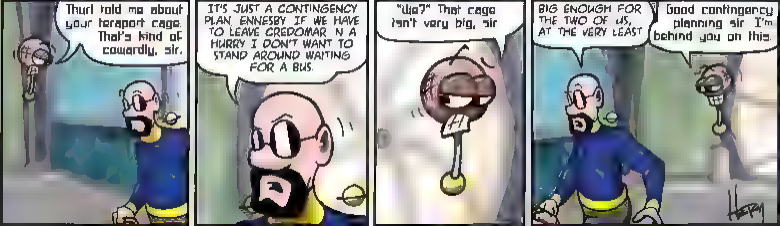

TWENTY ONE MINUTES AFTER KERCHAK'S FIRST CALLS
SCHLOCK, GRAB THE NEXT TRANSPORT UP HERE WE'RE ABANDONING THE CIRCUS CONTRACT FOR SOMETHING MORE URGENT
But sir, I still need to
NO "BUTS!" NO TIME NEXT TRANSPORT! GO!
Can you at least tell me what the mission is? That way I can tell Chiswic, Liz, and Chelle what they're missing out on while they're stuck in jail!

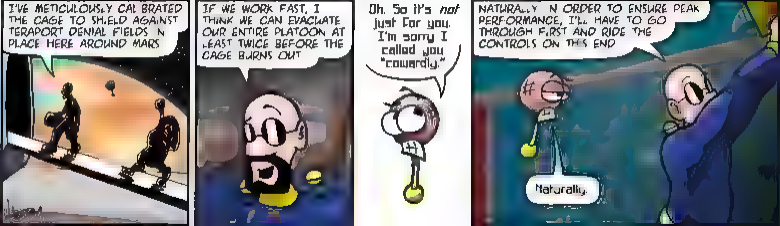

JUST POST BAIL FOR THOSE THREE AND GET UP HERE
That won't work. As soon as I show my face the cops will arrest me, too.
HAVE A BAILBONDSMAN DELIVER THE MONEY, SERGEANT
Okay. Bail is kind of high, though.
HOW HIGH?
THURL'S MAKING A FUNNY NOISE, COMMANDER.

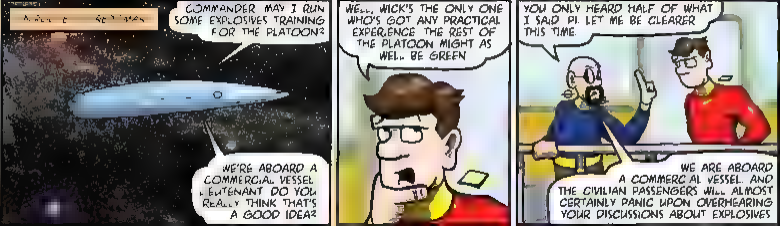

Thuri, I'm sorry, but we got into a lot of trouble down here. The circus thing was a trap.
If you want us to come along on this emergency mission, you're gonna need to extract us.
SERGEANT, THERE'S NO TIME YOUR TEAM SHOULD KEEP JUST FINE 'N JAIL UNTIL WE GET BACK
AND IF YOU'RE DOING THAT THING WITH YOUR EYES, DON'T BOTHER I'M ONLY GETTING AUDIO

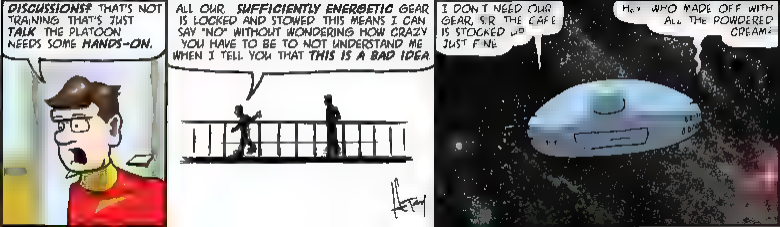

COMMANDER ANDREYASN, WE NEED YOUR COMMAND BACK HERE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE I HOPE YOU'RE ALL DONE WITH CREDOMAR.
REAL.Y? LITERALLY?
NO. OF COURSE NOT I MEAN, WHO COULD HAVE?
OKAY, PERFECT THAT SHOULD DO IT

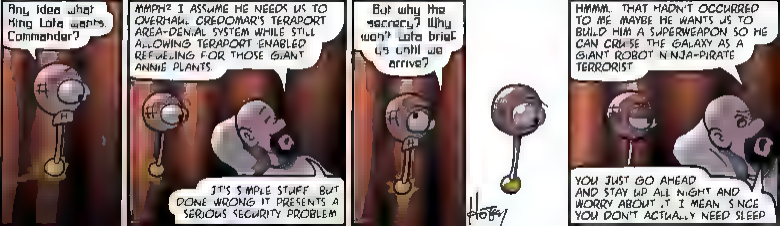

REWIND. SEVEN HUNDRED HOURS EARLIER. BERTHED AT THE HIGH OLYMPUS SHIPYARDS
OKAY. PERFECT THAT SHOULD DO IT
THUR! DON'T LET ANYBODY TOUCH MY TERAPORT CAGE. OKAY?
IT'S GOING TO BE IN THE WAY COMMANDER SOMEBODY WILL HAVE TO MOVE IT AT LEAST
IT'S ON A FLOAT-PALLET HERE'S THE REMOTE YOU CAN MOVE T WITHOUT TOUCHING IT
YOU'RE CREATING AN EMERGENCY EXIT FOR YOURSELF CLEVER
AND IF YOU DO MOVE T PLEASE PUT IT INSIDE THE HULL I LIKE BREATHING

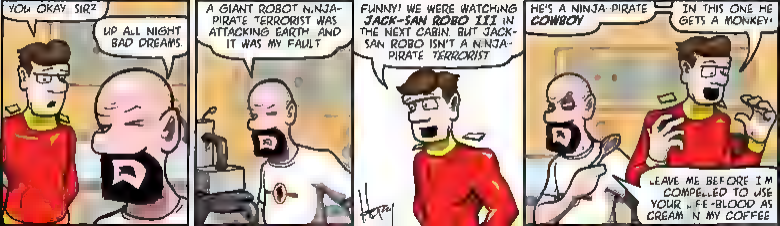

Thurl told me about your teraport cage. That's kind of cowardly, sir.
IT'S JUST A CONTINGENCY PLAN, ENNESBY. IF WE HAVE TO LEAVE GREDOMAR, N A HURRY, I DON'T WANT TO STAND AROUND WAITING FOR A BUS.
"Use?" That cage isn't very big, sir.
BIG ENOUGH FOR THE TWO OF US, AT THE VERY LEAST
Good contingency planning sir. I'm behind you on this.

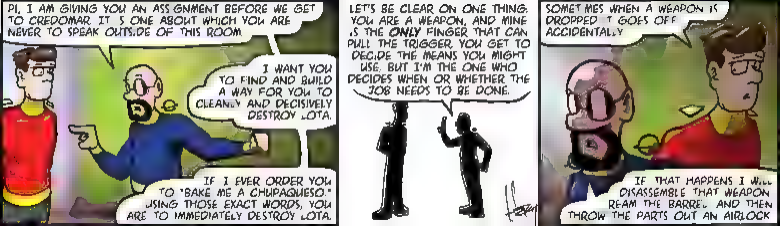

I'VE METICULOUSLY CALIBRATED THE CAGE TO SHIELD AGAINST TERAPORT DENIAL FIELDS IN PLACE HERE AROUND MARS
IF WE WORK FAST, I THINK WE CAN EVACUATE OUR ENTIRE PLATOON AT LEAST TWICE BEFORE THE CAGE BURNS OUT
Oh. So it's not just for you. I'm sorry I called you "cowardly."
NATURALLY. IN ORDER TO ENSURE PEAK PERFORMANCE, I'LL HAVE TO GO THROUGH FIRST AND RIDE THE CONTROLS ON THIS END
Naturally.

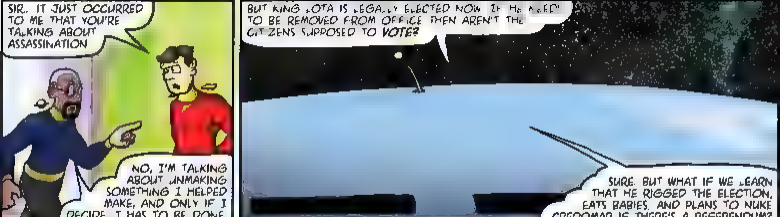

COMMANDER, MAY I RUN SOME EXPLOSIVES TRAINING FOR THE PLATOON?
WE'RE ABOARD A COMMERCIAL VESSEL, LIEUTENANT. DO YOU REALLY THINK THAT'S A GOOD IDEA?
WELL, WICK'S THE ONLY ONE WHO'S GOT ANY PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. THE REST OF THE PLATOON MIGHT AS WELL... BE GREEN
YOU ONLY HEARD HALF OF WHAT I SAID, PI. LET ME BE CLEARER THIS TIME.
WE ARE ABOARD A COMMERCIAL VESSEL, AND THE CIVILIAN PASSENGERS WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY PANIC UPON OVERHEARING YOUR DISCUSSIONS ABOUT EXPLOSIVES.


DISCUSSIONS? THAT'S NOT TRAINING. THAT'S JUST TALK. THE PLATOON NEEDS SOME HANDS-ON.
ALL OUR SUFFICIENTLY ENERGETIC GEAR IS LOCKED AND STOWED. THIS MEANS I CAN SAY "NO" WITHOUT WONDERING HOW CRAZY YOU HAVE TO BE TO NOT UNDERSTAND ME WHEN I TELL YOU THAT THIS IS A BAD IDEA.
I DON'T NEED OUR GEAR, SIR. THE CAFE IS STOCKED AND JUST FINE.
HEY! WHO MADE OFF WITH ALL THE POWDERED CREAM?

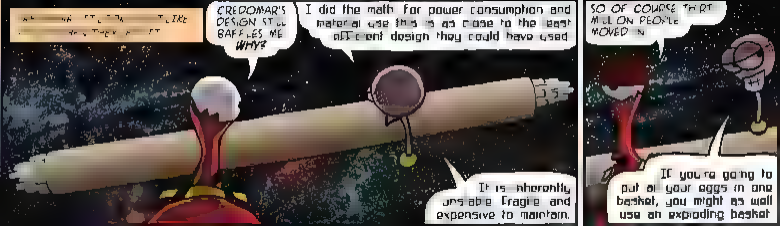

Any idea what King Lafe wants, Commander?
MMPH? I ASSUME HE NEEDS US TO OVERHAUL CREDOMAR'S TERAPORT AREA-DENIAL SYSTEM WHILE STILL ALLOWING TERAPORT ENABLED REFUELING FOR THOSE GIANT ANNIE PLANTS.
IT'S SIMPLE STUFF BUT DONE WRONG IT PRESENTS A SERIOUS SECURITY PROBLEM
But why the secrecy? Why won't Lafe brief us until we arrive?
HMMM. THAT HADN'T OCCURRED TO ME. MAYBE HE WANTS US TO BUILD HIM A SUPERWEAPON SO HE CAN CRUISE THE GALAXY AS A GIANT ROBOT NINJA-PIRATE TERRORIST
YOU JUST GO AHEAD AND STAY UP ALL NIGHT AND WORRY ABOUT IT I MEAN, SINCE YOU DON'T ACTUALLY NEED SLEEP

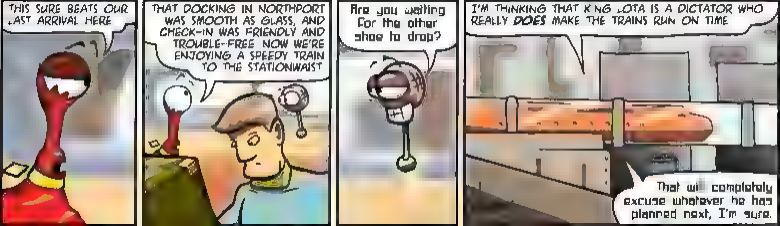

YOU OKAY, SIR?
UP ALL NIGHT BAD DREAMS
A GIANT ROBOT N.NJA-PIRATE TERRORIST WAS ATTACKING EARTH AND IT WAS MY FAULT
FUNNY! WE WERE WATCHING JACK-SAN ROBO III IN THE NEXT CABIN, BUT JACK-SAN ROBO ISN'T A NINJA-PIRATE TERRORIST
HE'S A NINJA-PIRATE COWBOY
IN THIS ONE HE GETS A MONKEY!
LEAVE ME BEFORE I M COMPELLED TO USE YOUR LIFE-BLOOD AS CREAM N MY COFFEE

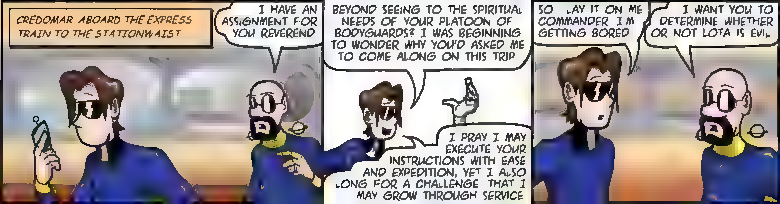

PI, I AM GIVING YOU AN ASSIGNMENT BEFORE WE GET TO CREDOMAR. IT'S ONE ABOUT WHICH YOU ARE NEVER TO SPEAK OUTSIDE OF THIS ROOM.
I WANT YOU TO FIND AND BUILD A WAY FOR YOU TO CLEANLY AND DECISIVELY DESTROY ILOTA.
IF I EVER ORDER YOU TO "BAKE ME A CHUPAQUESO," USING THOSE EXACT WORDS, YOU ARE TO IMMEDIATELY DESTROY ILOTA.
LET'S BE CLEAR ON ONE THING: YOU ARE A WEAPON, AND MINE IS THE ONLY FINGER THAT CAN PULL THE TRIGGER. YOU GET TO DECIDE THE MEANS YOU MIGHT USE. BUT I'M THE ONE WHO DECIDES WHEN OR WHETHER THE JOB NEEDS TO BE DONE.
SOMETIMES WHEN A WEAPON IS DROPPED IT GOES OFF ACCIDENTALLY.
IF THAT HAPPENS I WILL DISASSEMBLE THAT WEAPON, REAM THE BARREL AND THEN THROW THE PARTS OUT AN AIRLOCK

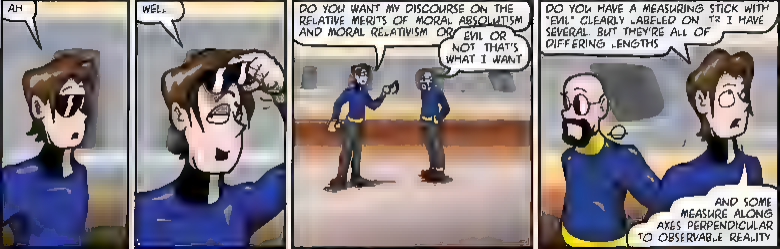

SIR. IT JUST OCCURRED TO ME THAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT ASSASSINATION
NO, I'M TALKING ABOUT UNMAKING SOMETHING I HELPED MAKE, AND ONLY IF I DECIDE IT HAS TO BE DONE
BUT KING LOTA IS LEGALLY ELECTED NOW. IF HE NEED TO BE REMOVED FROM OFFICE THEN AREN'T THE CITIZENS SUPPOSED TO VOTE?
SURE. BUT WHAT IF WE LEARN THAT HE RIGGED THE ELECTION, EATS BABIES, AND PLANS TO NUKE CREDOMAR IF THERE'S A REFERENDUM?

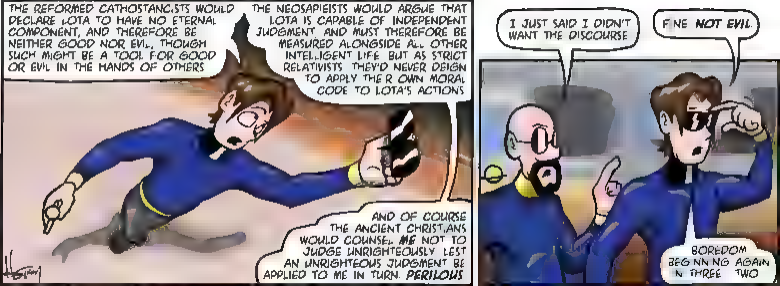

THEN I GUESS A DOT OF ANTI-LACED BOOMEX IS GOING TO LEAVE A ROYAL CRATER.
WHERE ARE YOU GOING TO GET
I SNUCK SOME FULLERENED ANTI-MATTER INTO MY CARRY-ON.
THANK YOU FOR NOT MIXING WITH THE POWDERED CREAM

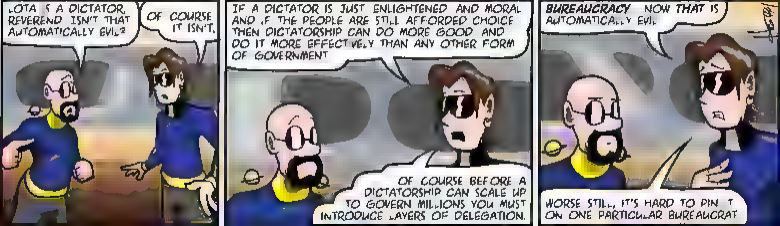

CREDOMAR'S DESIGN STILL BAFFLES ME WHY?
I did the math. For power consumption and material use this is as close to the best different design they could have used
It is horribly unstable. Fragile and expensive to maintain.
SO OF COURSE THAT MUCH ON PEOPLE MOVED IN
IF you're going to put all your eggs in one basket, you might as well use an exploding basket

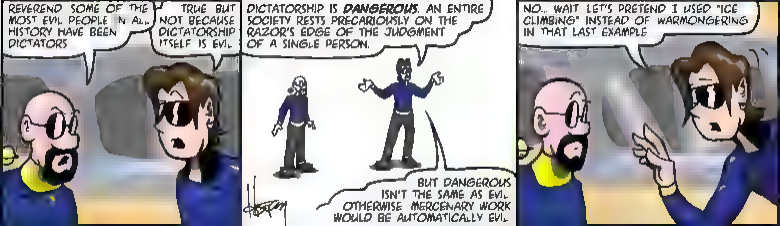

THIS SURE BEATS OUR LAST ARRIVAL HERE
THAT DOCKING IN NORTHPORT WAS SMOOTH AS GLASS, AND CHECK-IN WAS FRIENDLY AND TROUBLE-FREE. NOW WE'RE ENJOYING A SPEEDY TRAIN TO THE STATIONMAST
Are you waiting for the other shoe to drop?
I'M THINKING THAT KING LOTA IS A DICTATOR WHO REALLY DOES MAKE THE TRAINS RUN ON TIME
That will completely excuse whatever he has planned next, I'm sure.

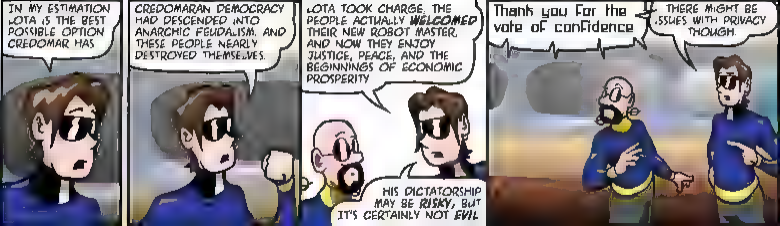

CREDOMAR ABOARD THE EXPRESS TRAIN TO THE STATIONMAIST
I HAVE AN ASSIGNMENT FOR YOU REVEREND
BEYOND SEEING TO THE SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF YOUR PLATOON OF BODYGUARDS? I WAS BEGINNING TO WONDER WHY YOU'D ASKED ME TO COME ALONG ON THIS TRIP
I PRAY I MAY EXECUTE YOUR INSTRUCTIONS WITH EASE AND EXPEDITION, YET I ALSO LONG FOR A CHALLENGE THAT I MAY GROW THROUGH SERVICE
SO ..LAY IT ON ME COMMANDER I'M GETTING BORED
I WANT YOU TO DETERMINE WHETHER OR NOT LOTA IS EVIL.

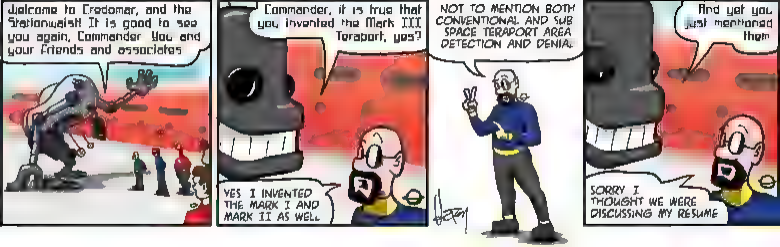

AH
WELL
DO YOU WANT MY DISCOURSE ON THE RELATIVE MERITS OF MORAL ABSOLUTISM AND MORAL RELATIVISM OR
EVIL OR NOT THAT'S WHAT I WANT
DO YOU HAVE A MEASURING STICK WITH "EVIL" CLEARLY LABELED ON IT? I HAVE SEVERAL. BUT THEY'RE ALL OF DIFFERING LENGTHS
AND SOME MEASURE ALONG AXES PERPENDICULAR TO OBSERVABLE REALITY

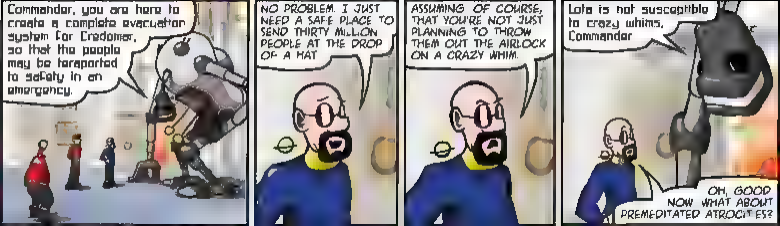

THE REFORMED CATHOSTANCISTS WOULD DECLARE LOTA TO HAVE NO ETERNAL COMPONENT, AND THEREFORE BE NEITHER GOOD NOR EVIL, THOUGH SUCH MIGHT BE A TOOL FOR GOOD OR EVIL IN THE HANDS OF OTHERS
THE NEOSAPIEISTS WOULD ARGUE THAT LOTA IS CAPABLE OF INDEPENDENT JUDGMENT AND MUST THEREFORE BE MEASURED ALONGSIDE ALL OTHER INTELLIGENT LIFE BUT AS STOICT RELATIVISTS THEY'D NEVER DESIGN TO APPLY THEIR OWN MORAL CODE TO LOTA'S ACTIONS
AND OF COURSE THE ANCIENT CHRISTIANS WOULD COUNSEL ME NOT TO JUDGE UNRIGHTEOUSLY, LEST IT AN UNRIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT BE APPLIED TO ME IN TURN. PERILOUS
I JUST SAID I DIDN'T WANT THE DISCOURSE
FINE NOT EVIL
BOREDOM BEGINNING AGAIN IN THREE TWO

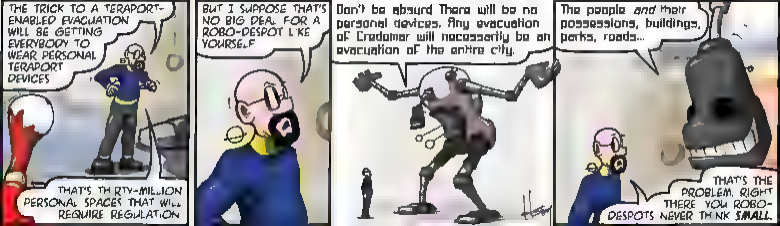

LOTA IS A DICTATOR, REVEREND ISN'T THAT AUTOMATICALLY EVIL?
OF COURSE IT ISN'T.
IF A DICTATOR IS JUST ENLIGHTENED AND MORAL AND IF THE PEOPLE ARE STILL AFFORDED CHOICE THEN DICTATORSHIP CAN DO MORE GOOD AND DO IT MORE EFFECTIVELY THAN ANY OTHER FORM OF GOVERNMENT
OF COURSE BEFORE A DICTATORSHIP CAN SCALE UP TO GOVERN MILLIONS YOU MUST INTRODUCE LAYERS OF DELEGATION.
BUREAUCRACY NOW THAT IS AUTOMATICALLY EVIL.
WORSE STILL, IT'S HARD TO PIN IT ON ONE PARTICULAR BUREAUCRAT

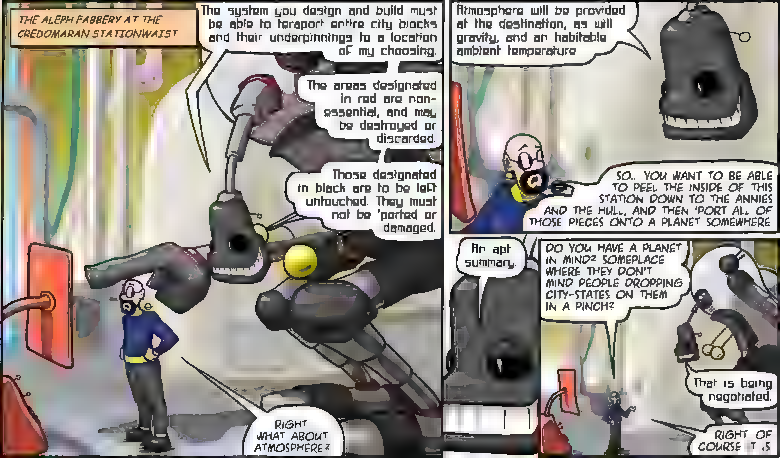

REVEREND SOME OF THE MOST EVIL PEOPLE IN ALL HISTORY HAVE BEEN DICTATORS
TRUE BUT NOT BECAUSE DICTATORSHIP ITSELF IS EVIL.
DICTATORSHIP IS DANGEROUS. AN ENTIRE SOCIETY RESTS PRECARIOUSLY ON THE RAZOR'S EDGE OF THE JUDGMENT OF A SINGLE PERSON.
BUT DANGEROUS ISN'T THE SAME AS EVIL. OTHERWISE MERCENARY WORK WOULD BE AUTOMATICALLY EVIL.
NO... WAIT LET'S PRETEND I USED "ICE CLIMBING" INSTEAD OF WARMONGERING IN THAT LAST EXAMPLE

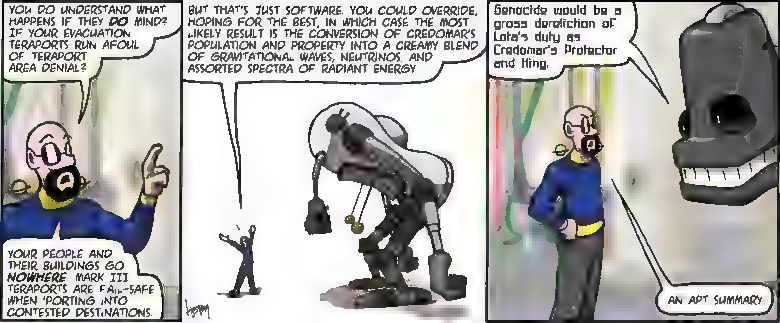

IN MY ESTIMATION LOTA IS THE BEST POSSIBLE OPTION CREDOMAR HAS
CREDOMARAN DEMOCRACY HAD DESCENDED INTO ANARCHIC FEUDALISM, AND THESE PEOPLE NEARLY DESTROYED THEMSELVES.
LOTA TOOK CHARGE. THE PEOPLE ACTUALLY WELCOMED THEIR NEW ROBOT MASTER, AND NOW THEY ENJOY JUSTICE, PEACE, AND THE BEGINNINGS OF ECONOMIC PROSPERITY
HIS DICTATORSHIP MAY BE RISKY, BUT IT'S CERTAINLY NOT EVIL
Thank you For the vote of confidence
THERE MIGHT BE ISSUES WITH PRIVACY THOUGH.


Welcome to Crodomar, and the Stationwaist! It is good to see you again, Commander. You and your friends and associates
Commander, it is true that you invented the Mark III Teraport, yes?
YES. I INVENTED THE MARK I AND MARK II AS WELL
NOT TO MENTION BOTH CONVENTIONAL AND SUB SPACE TERAPORT AREA DETECTION AND DENIAL
And yet you just mentioned them
SORRY. I THOUGHT WE WERE DISCUSSING MY RESUME

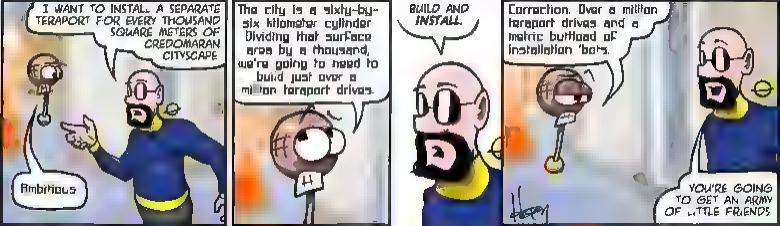

Commander, you are here to create a complete evacuation system for Credomer, so that the people may be teraported to safety in an emergency.
NO PROBLEM. I JUST NEED A SAFE PLACE TO SEND THIRTY MILLION PEOPLE AT THE DROP OF A HAT
ASSUMING OF COURSE, THAT YOU'RE NOT JUST PLANNING TO THROW THEM OUT THE AIRLOCK ON A CRAZY WHIM.
Loha is not susceptible to crazy whims, Commander
OH, GOOD. NOW WHAT ABOUT PREMEDITATED ATROCITIES?

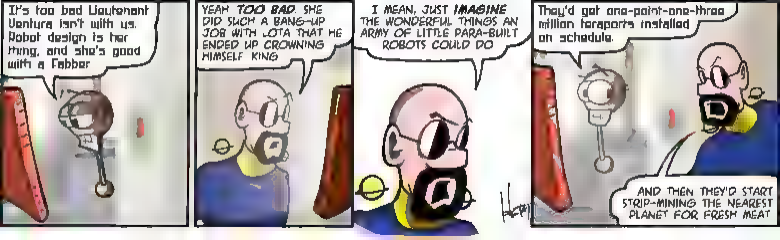

THE TRICK TO A TERAPORT-ENABLED EVACUATION WILL BE GETTING EVERYBODY TO WEAR PERSONAL TERAPORT DEVICES
THAT'S TH RTY-MILLION PERSONAL SPACES THAT WILL REQUIRE REGULATION
BUT I SUPPOSE THAT'S NO BIG DEAL. FOR A ROBO-DESPOT LIKE YOURSELF
Don't be absurd. There will be no personal devices. Any evacuation of Crodomer will necessarily be an evacuation of the entire city.
The people and their possessions, buildings, parks, roads...
THAT'S THE PROBLEM, RIGHT THERE. YOU ROBO-DESPOTS NEVER THINK SMALL.

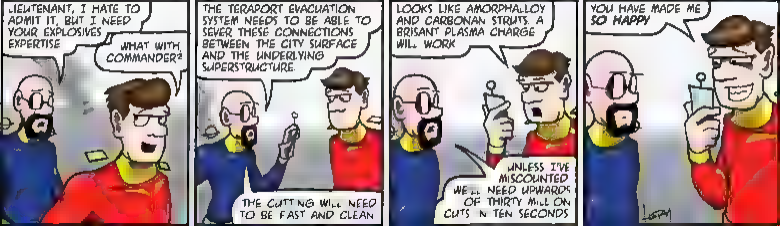

THE ALEPH FABBERY AT THE CREDOMARAN STATIONWAIST
The system you design and build must be able to teraport entire city blocks and their underpinnings to a location of my choosing.
The areas designated in red are non-essential, and may be destroyed or discarded.
Those designated in black are to be left untouched. They must not be 'ported or damaged.
RIGHT. WHAT ABOUT ATMOSPHERE?
Atmosphere will be provided at the destination, as will gravity, and an habitable ambient temperature
SO. YOU WANT TO BE ABLE TO PEEL THE INSIDE OF THIS STATION DOWN TO THE ANNIES AND THE HULL, AND THEN 'PORT ALL OF THOSE PIECES ONTO A PLANET SOMEWHERE
An apt summary.
DO YOU HAVE A PLANET IN MIND? SOMEPLACE WHERE THEY DON'T MIND PEOPLE DROPPING CITY-STATES ON THEM IN A PINCH?
That is being negotiated.
RIGHT OF COURSE IT IS


YOU DO UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENS IF THEY DO MIND? IF YOUR EVACUATION TERAPORTS RUN AFOUL OF TERAPORT AREA DENIALS
YOUR PEOPLE AND THEIR BUILDINGS GO NOWHERE. MARK III TERAPORTS ARE FAIL-SAFE WHEN 'PORTING INTO CONTESTED DESTINATIONS.
BUT THAT'S JUST SOFTWARE. YOU COULD OVERRIDE, HOPING FOR THE BEST, IN WHICH CASE THE MOST LIKELY RESULT IS THE CONVERSION OF CREDOMAR'S POPULATION AND PROPERTY INTO A CREAMY BLEND OF GRAVITATIONAL WAVES, NEUTRINOS AND ASSORTED SPECTRA OF RADIANT ENERGY
Genocide would be a gross dereliction of Lota's duty as Credomar's Protector and King.
AN APT SUMMARY.

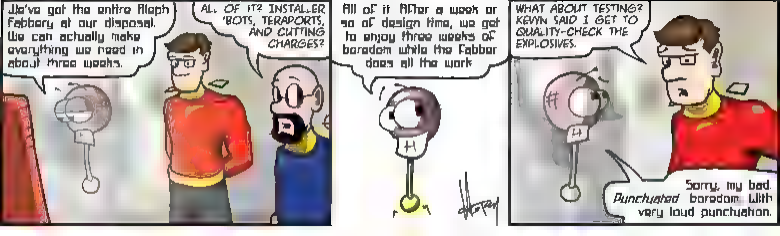

Hi, Thurl. I'm looking for good ways to one-shot heavy armor
Pi, I'm sure Kevvn can offer some advice there
Yeah. He's busy. What would Schlock do?
What do you mean "what would Schlock do?"
I do explosives. He does heavy weapons. If I were to kill a tank his way, how would I do it?
Well, I guess that depends on how much firepower you're mauling around on your person now doesn't it?
I've got a side arm and some fullerened anti matter
Oh the sweet whimsy of barracks science projects. How I miss t

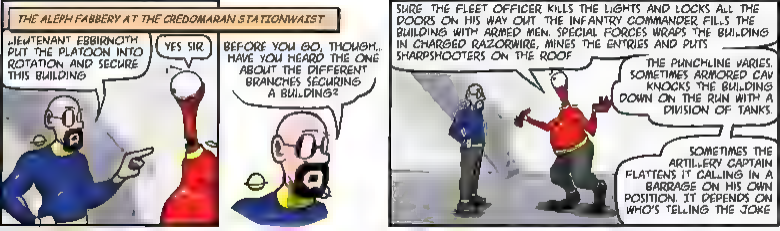

I WANT TO INSTALL A SEPARATE TERAPORT FOR EVERY THOUSAND SQUARE METERS OF CREODOMARAN CITYSCAPE
Ambitious
The city is a sixty-by-six kilometer cylinder. Dividing that surface area by a thousand, we're going to need to build just over a million teraport drives.
BUILD AND INSTALL.
Correction. Over a million teraport drives and a metric buttload of installation 'bots.
YOU'RE GOING TO GET AN ARMY OF LITTLE FRIENDS


It's too bad Lieutenant Ventura isn't with us. Robot design is her thing, and she's good with a Fabber.
YEAH TOO BAD SHE DID SUCH A BANG-UP JOB WITH LOTA THAT HE ENDED UP CROWNING HIMSELF KING
I MEAN, JUST IMAGINE THE WONDERFUL THINGS AN ARMY OF LITTLE PARA-BUILT ROBOTS COULD DO
They'd got one-point-one-three million faraports installed on schedule.
AND THEN THEY'D START STRIP-MINING THE NEAREST PLANET FOR FRESH MEAT

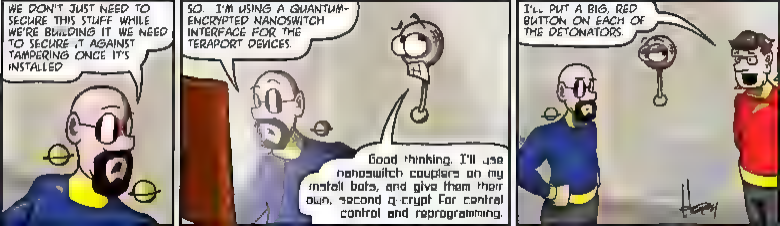

LIEUTENANT, I HATE TO ADMIT IT, BUT I NEED YOUR EXPLOSIVES EXPERTISE
WHAT WITH, COMMANDER?
THE TERAPORT EVACUATION SYSTEM NEEDS TO BE ABLE TO SEVER THESE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE CITY SURFACE AND THE UNDERLYING SUPERSTRUCTURE.
THE CUTTING WILL NEED TO BE FAST AND CLEAN
LOOKS LIKE AMORPHALLOY AND CARBONAN STRUTS. A BRISANT PLASMA CHARGE WILL WORK
UNLESS I'VE MISCOUNTED WE'LL NEED UPWARDS OF THIRTY MILLION CUTS IN TEN SECONDS
YOU HAVE MADE ME SO HAPPY
LOSPH


PJ, I'M NOT TELLING YOU THAT WE'LL ACTUALLY GET TO USE THESE MILLIONS OF CUTTING CHARGES. I'M ASKING YOU TO DESIGN AND BUILD THEM.
OH. OKAY
I'LL HAVE TO TEST A FEW OUT OF EACH BATCH, OF COURSE.
ONLY IF YOU INVITE ME


We've got the entire Aleph Fabbery at our disposal. We can actually make everything we need in about three weeks.
ALL OF IT? INSTALLER 'BOTS, TERAPORTS, AND CUTTING CHARGES?
All of it. After a week or so of design time, we get to enjoy three weeks of boredom while the Fabber does all the work
WHAT ABOUT TESTING? KEVYN SAID I GET TO QUALITY-CHECK THE EXPLOSIVES.
Sorry, my bad. *Punctuated* boredom. With very loud punctuation.

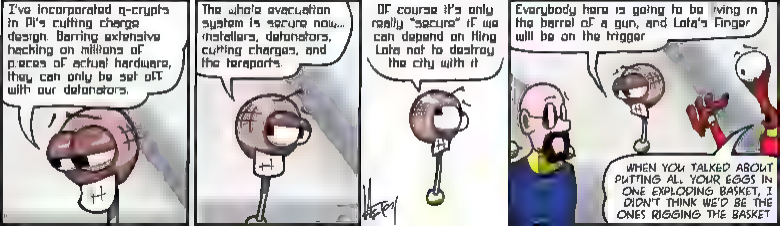

THE ALEPH FABBERY AT THE CREDOMARAN STATIONWAIST
LIEUTENANT EBBIRNOTH PUT THE PLATOON INTO ROTATION AND SECURE THIS BUILDING
YES SIR
BEFORE YOU GO, THOUGH... HAVE YOU HEARD THE ONE ABOUT THE DIFFERENT BRANCHES SECURING A BUILDING?
SURE THE FLEET OFFICER KILLS THE LIGHTS AND LOCKS ALL THE DOORS ON HIS WAY OUT. THE INFANTRY COMMANDER FILLS THE BUILDING WITH ARMED MEN. SPECIAL FORCES WRAPS THE BUILDING IN CHARGED RAZORWIRE, MINES THE ENTRIES AND PUTS SHARPSHOOTERS ON THE ROOF
THE PUNCHLINE VARIES. SOMETIMES ARMORED CAV KNOCKS THE BUILDING DOWN ON THE RUN WITH A DIVISION OF TANKS
SOMETIMES THE ARTILLERY CAPTAIN FLATTENS IT CALLING IN A BARRAGE ON HIS OWN POSITION. IT DEPENDS ON WHO'S TELLING THE JOKE

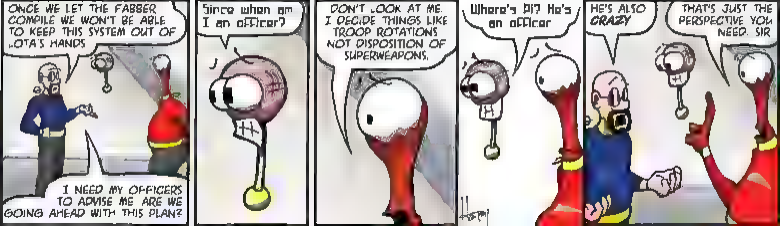

THE WAY I HEARD IT PARLIAMENT PASSED A LAW MAKING IT ILLEGAL FOR ANYBODY TO ENTER OR LEAVE STILL, I'M GLAD YOU'VE HEARD THE JOKE.
BY THE MIDDLE OF NEXT WEEK THIS FACILITY IS GOING TO BE CRANKING OUT ENOUGH EXPLOSIVES TO LEVEL A CITY AND AN ARMY OF LITTLE ROBOTS TO PLACE THE CHARGES.
SO WHEN YOU SAY YOU WANT THE BUILDING SECURED.
I DON'T WANT A PUNCHLINE


WE DON'T JUST NEED TO SECURE THIS STUFF WHILE WE'RE BUILDING IT. WE NEED TO SECURE IT AGAINST TAMPERING ONCE IT'S INSTALLED
SO. I'M USING A QUANTUM-ENCRYPTED NANOSWITCH INTERFACE FOR THE TERAPORT DEVICES.
Good thinking. I'll use nanoswitch couplers on my install bots, and give them their own, second q-crypt for control control and reprogramming.
I'LL PUT A BIG, RED BUTTON ON EACH OF THE DETONATORS.

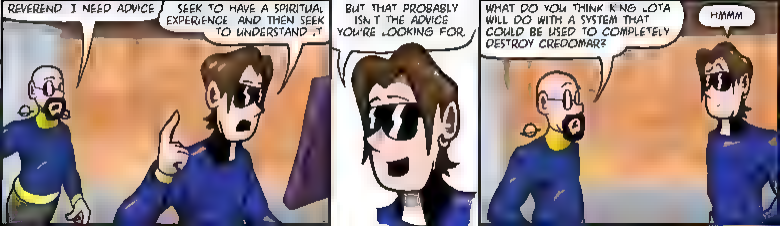

PI IF THOSE CUTTING CHARGES ARE MISUSED THE BUILDINGS HERE ,N CREDOMAR WILL ALL START TWISTING AND FALL NG
HOW ABOUT WE SECURE THE DETONATION PROCESS WITH SOMETHING BESIDES A BIG, RED BUTTON?
I COULD USE A PURPLE BUTTON, BUT IT FEELS WRONG
"SECURITY THROUGH OBSCURITY" NEEDS A BIT MORE OBSCURITY THAN JUST "PURPLE." LIEUTENANT

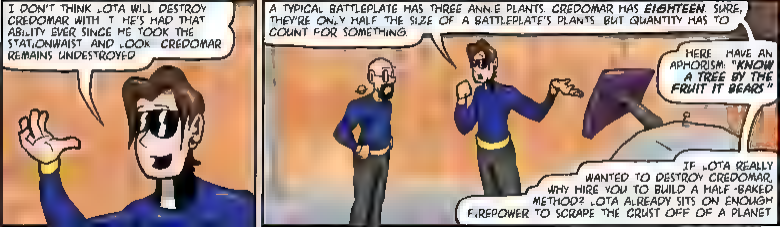

HOW'S THIS? EACH CUTTING CHARGE WILL RESPOND TO AN ENCRYPTED TRANSMISSION. AND THE TRANSMITTERS WILL BE AGGREGATED UNDER A CENTRAL CONTROL SYSTEM WHICH WILL ALSO BE ENCRYPTED
YEAH, THAT'S GOOD. I CAN DO THAT
THAT CENTRAL CONTROL SYSTEM. IT'S GOING TO HAVE A BIG RED BUTTON, RIGHT?
BRIGHT RED. VERY BIG. ABSOLUTELY.


I've incorporated q-crypts in Di's cutting charge design. Barring extensive hacking on millions of pieces of actual hardware, they can only be set off with our detonators.
The whole evacuation system is secure now... installers, detonators, cutting charges, and the teraports.
Of course it's only really "secure" if we can depend on King Lote not to destroy the city with it
Everybody here is going to be living in the barrel of a gun, and Lote's finger will be on the trigger
WHEN YOU TALKED ABOUT PUTTING ALL YOUR EGGS IN ONE EXPLODING BASKET, I DIDN'T THINK WE'D BE THE ONES RIGGING THE BASKET

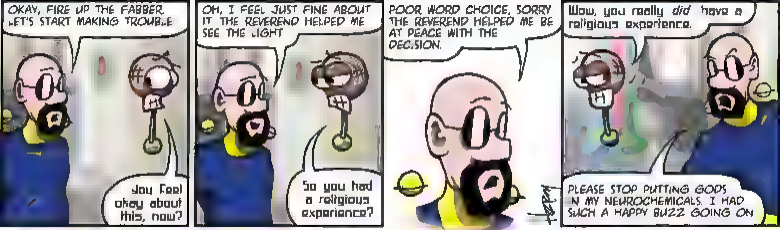

ONCE WE LET THE FABBER COMPILE WE WON'T BE ABLE TO KEEP THIS SYSTEM OUT OF ..OTA'S HANDS
I NEED MY OFFICERS TO ADVISE ME ARE WE GOING AHEAD WITH THIS PLAN?
Since when am I an officer?
DON'T LOOK AT ME. I DECIDE THINGS LIKE TROOP ROTATIONS NOT DISPOSITION OF SUPERWEAPONS.
Where's Bill? He's an officer
HE'S ALSO CRAZY
THAT'S JUST THE PERSPECTIVE YOU NEED, SIR.

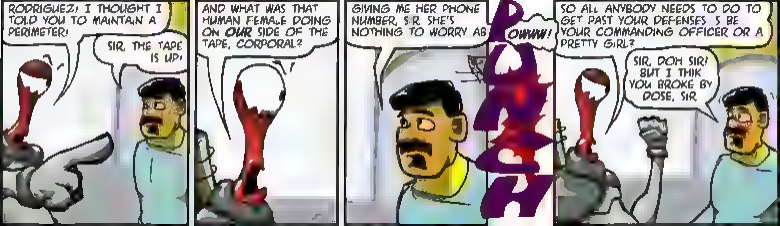

PJ, WE'RE ABOUT TO START BUILDING AN EVACUATION SYSTEM THAT COULD BE USED TO MURDER THIRTY MILLION PEOPLE
CONTROL OF THIS SYSTEM IS GOING TO REST IN THE HANDS OF KING LOTA.
ADVISE ME, LIEUTENANT DO WE GO THROUGH WITH IT?
BACK ON THE SHIP YOU KIND OF SUGGESTED THAT YOU WERE THE ONE WHO WAS GOING TO DECIDE HOW SANE AND SAFE LOTA WAS.
YOU EVEN GAVE ME AN ORDER TO THAT EFFECT, SIR
ARE YOU TRYING TO TELL ME I CAN'T HAVE IT BOTH WAYS?
YOU'RE RATIONAL, SIR. IT'S ONLY US CRAZY PEOPLE WHO GET TO SWAP OUT REAL TIES ON A WHIM.

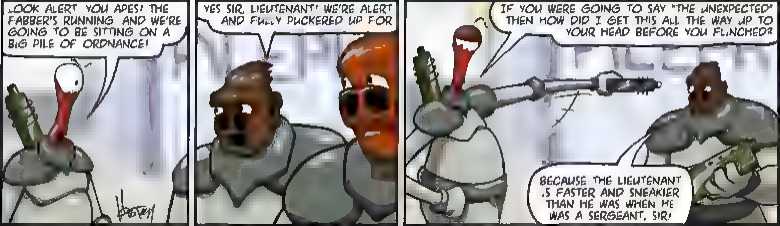

REVEREND I NEED ADVICE
SEEK TO HAVE A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE AND THEN SEEK TO UNDERSTAND IT
BUT THAT PROBABLY ISN'T THE ADVICE YOU'RE LOOKING FOR.
WHAT DO YOU THINK KING LOTA WILL DO WITH A SYSTEM THAT COULD BE USED TO COMPLETELY DESTROY CREDOMAR?
HMMM


I DON'T THINK ↓OTA WILL DESTROY CREDOMAR WITH T HE'S HAD THAT ABILITY EVER SINCE HE TOOK THE STATIONWAIST AND ↓OOK CREDOMAR REMAINS UNDESTROYED
A TYPICAL BATTLEPLATE HAS THREE ANN.E PLANTS. CREDOMAR HAS EIGHTEEN. SURE, THEY'RE ONLY HALF THE SIZE OF A BATTLEPLATE'S PLANTS BUT QUANTITY HAS TO COUNT FOR SOMETHING.
HERE. HAVE AN APHORISM: "KNOW A TREE BY THE FRUIT IT BEARS"
IF ↓OTA REALLY WANTED TO DESTROY CREDOMAR, WHY HIRE YOU TO BUILD A HALF-BAKED METHOD? ↓OTA ALREADY SITS ON ENOUGH FIREPOWER TO SCRAPE THE CRUST OFF OF A PLANET

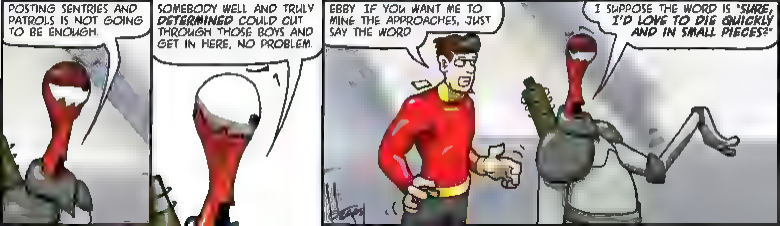

THAT'S... ACTUALLY A REALLY GOOD POINT
I THINK YOU MAY HAVE CONVINCED ME TO FEE... I DON'T KNOW PEACE?
YEAH. PEACE. I AM BUILDING A POTENTIAL SUPERWEAPON FOR SOMEBODY WHO CAN ALREADY SCRAPE THE CRUST OFF OF A PLANET, AND I AM AT PEACE
THANKS, REVEREND
"... AND THEN SEEK TO UNDERSTAND IT."

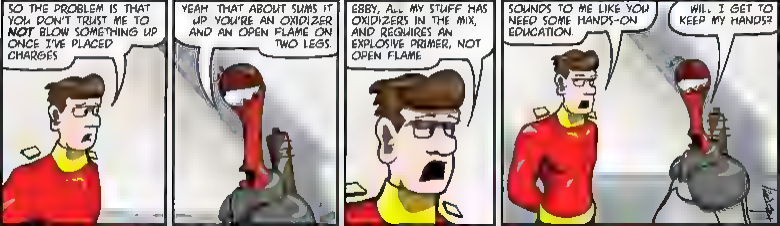

OKAY, FIRE UP THE FABBER. LET'S START MAKING TROUBLE
You feel okay about this, now?
OH, I FEEL JUST FINE ABOUT IT THE REVEREND HELPED ME SEE THE LIGHT
So you had a religious experience?
POOR WORD CHOICE, SORRY THE REVEREND HELPED ME BE AT PEACE WITH THE DECISION.
Wow, you really did have a religious experience.
PLEASE STOP PUTTING GODS IN MY NEUROCHEMICALS I HAD SUCH A HAPPY BUZZ GOING ON

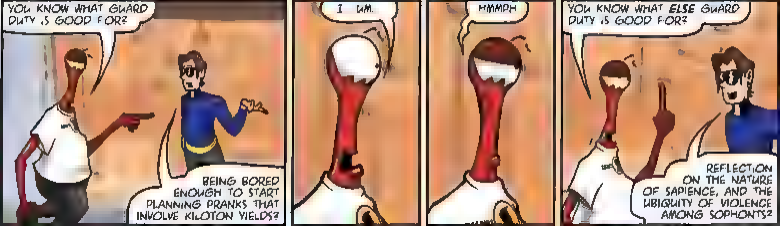

RODRIGUEZ! I THOUGHT I TOLD YOU TO MAINTAIN A PERIMETER!
SIR, THE TAPE IS UP!
AND WHAT WAS THAT HUMAN FEMALE DOING ON OUR SIDE OF THE TAPE, CORPORAL?
GIVING ME HER PHONE NUMBER, SIR SHE'S NOTHING TO WORRY AB
OWWW!
SO ALL ANYBODY NEEDS TO DO TO GET PAST YOUR DEFENSES S BE YOUR COMMANDING OFFICER OR A PRETTY GIRL?
SIR, DOH SIR! BUT I THIK YOU BROKE BY DOSE, SIR

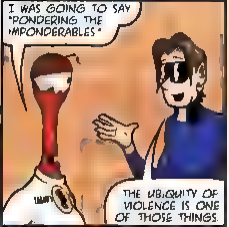

LOOK ALERT YOU APES! THE FABBER'S RUNNING AND WE'RE GOING TO BE SITTING ON A BIG PILE OF ORDNANCE!
YES SIR, LIEUTENANT! WE'RE ALERT AND FULLY PUCKERED UP FOR
IF YOU WERE GOING TO SAY "THE UNEXPECTED" THEN HOW DID I GET THIS ALL THE WAY UP TO YOUR HEAD BEFORE YOU FLINCHED?
BECAUSE THE LIEUTENANT IS FASTER AND SNEAKIER THAN HE WAS WHEN HE WAS A SERGEANT, SIR!

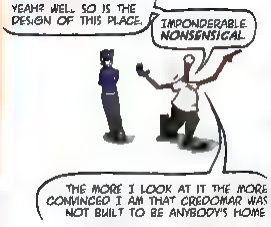

NOW, YOU BOYS GET YOUR HELMETS ON. AND PUCKER YOURSELVES UP. THE WAY UP! SOMEBODY COULD HAVE GOTTEN HURT DURING MY LITTLE DEMONSTRATION.
SIR, YES SIR! WHAT ABOUT YOUR HELMET SIR?
WE CAN GROW ME A NEW EYE, AND MY BRAIN'S IN MY PELVIC CRADLE
SIR, I'M SURE IT IS, SIR!


POSTING SENTRIES AND PATROLS IS NOT GOING TO BE ENOUGH.
SOMEBODY WELL AND TRULY DETERMINED COULD CUT THROUGH THOSE BOYS AND GET IN HERE, NO PROBLEM.
EBBY IF YOU WANT ME TO MINE THE APPROACHES, JUST SAY THE WORD
I SUPPOSE THE WORD IS "SURE, I'D LOVE TO DIE QUICKLY AND IN SMALL PIECES."

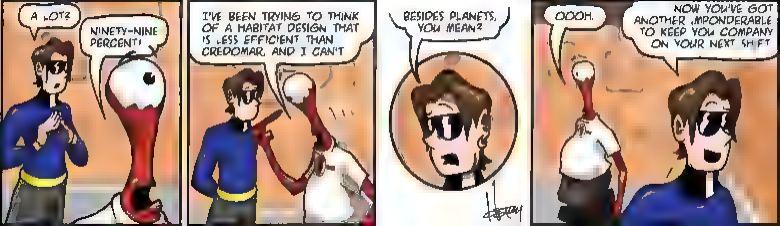

SO THE PROBLEM IS THAT YOU DON'T TRUST ME TO NOT BLOW SOMETHING UP ONCE I'VE PLACED CHARGES
YEAH THAT ABOUT SUMS IT UP. YOU'RE AN OXIDIZER AND AN OPEN FLAME ON TWO LEGS.
EBBY, ALL MY STUFF HAS OXIDIZERS IN THE MIX, AND REQUIRES AN EXPLOSIVE PRIMER, NOT OPEN FLAME
SOUNDS TO ME LIKE YOU NEED SOME HANDS-ON EDUCATION.
WILL I GET TO KEEP MY HANDS?

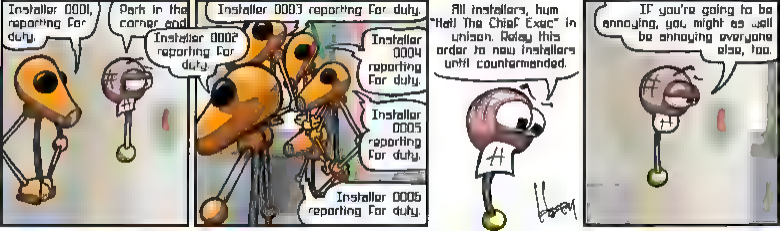

YOU KNOW WHAT GUARD DUTY IS GOOD FOR?
BEING BORED ENOUGH TO START PLANNING PRANKS THAT INVOLVE KILOTON YIELDS?
I UM.
HMMPH
YOU KNOW WHAT ELSE GUARD DUTY IS GOOD FOR?
REFLECTION ON THE NATURE OF SAPIENCE, AND THE UBIQUITY OF VIOLENCE AMONG SOPHONTS?

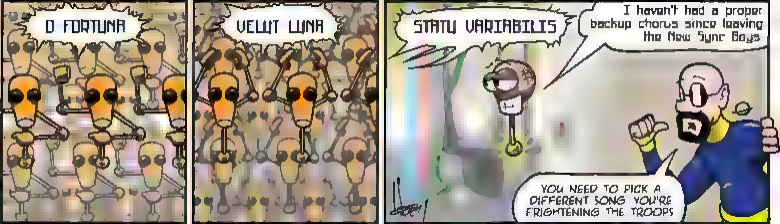

I WAS GOING TO SAY "PONDERING THE IMPONDERABLES."
THE UBIQUITY OF VIOLENCE IS ONE OF THOSE THINGS.


YEAH? WELL, SO IS THE DESIGN OF THIS PLACE.
IMPONDERABLE NONSENSICAL
THE MORE I LOOK AT IT THE MORE CONVINCED I AM THAT CREDOMAR WAS NOT BUILT TO BE ANYBODY'S HOME

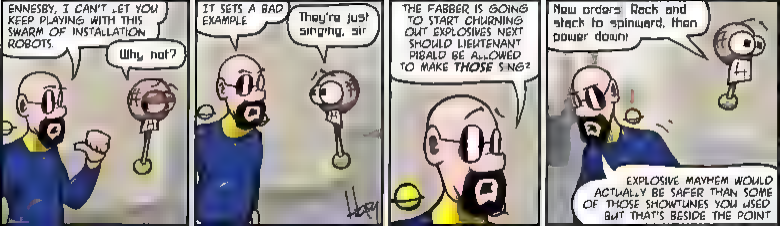

IF WE TERAPORT ALL THE PEOPLE AND ALL THEIR STUFF, THE ENTIRE INTERIOR ECOSYSTEM, DO YOU KNOW WHAT PERCENTAGE OF CREDOMAR'S MASS WILL BE LEFT BEHIND?


A LOT2
NINETY-NINE PERCENT!
I'VE BEEN TRYING TO THINK OF A HABITAT DESIGN THAT IS LESS EFFICIENT THAN CREDOMAR, AND I CAN'T
BESIDES PLANETS, YOU MEAN?
OOOH.
NOW YOU'VE GOT ANOTHER IMPONDERABLE TO KEEP YOU COMPANY ON YOUR NEXT SHIFT


Installer 0001, reporting For duty.
Park in the corner and
Installer 0002 reporting For duty.
Installer 0003 reporting For duty.
Installer 0004 reporting For duty.
Installer 0005 reporting For duty.
Installer 0006 reporting For duty.
All installers, hum "Hail The Chief Exec" in unison. Relay this order to new installers until countermanded.
IF you're going to be annoying, you might as well be annoying everyone else, too.

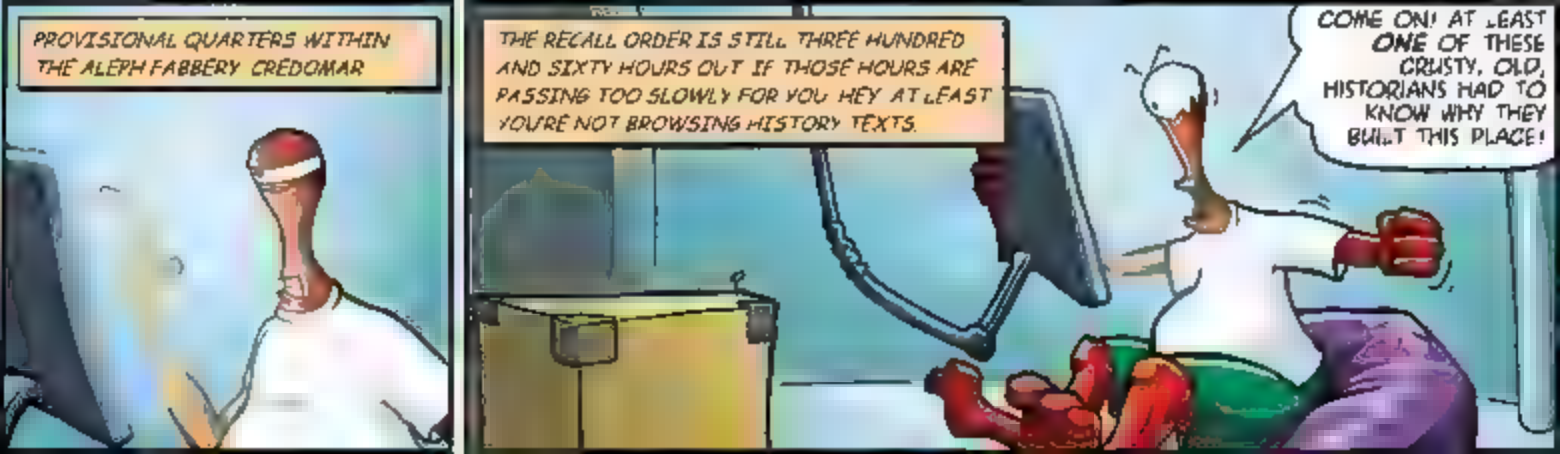

O FORTUNA
VELUT LUNA
STATU VARIABILIS
I haven't had a proper backup chorus since leaving the New Sync Boys
YOU NEED TO PICK A DIFFERENT SONG YOU'RE FRIGHTENING THE TROOPS

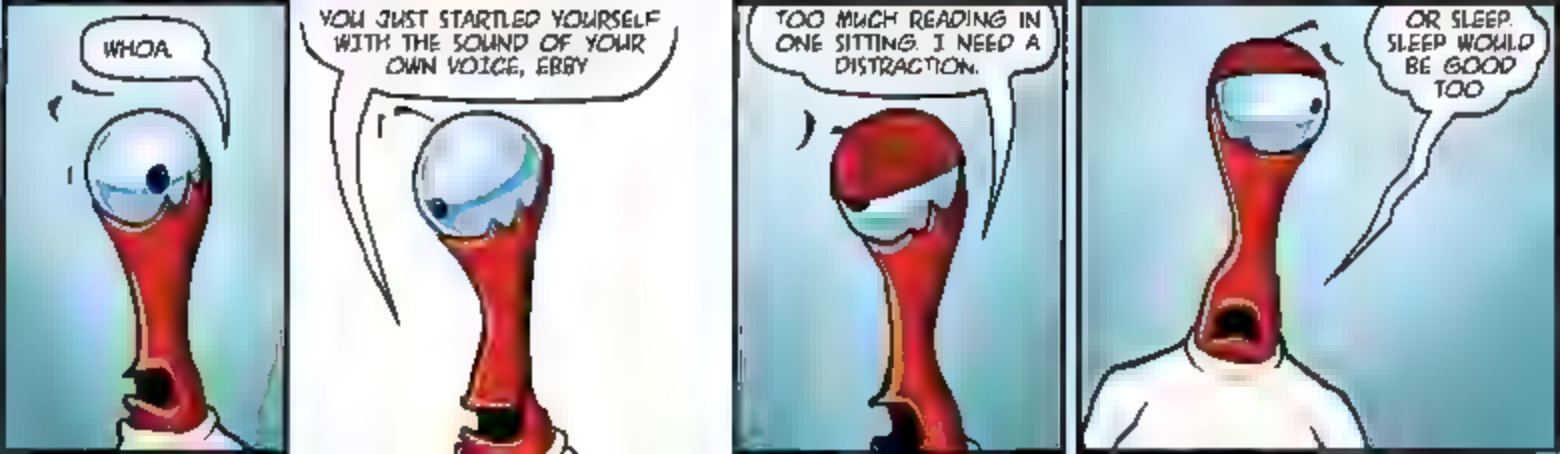

BECAUSE THAT PARTICULAR TRIBAL DANCE-CHANT HAS BEEN BANNED DOZENS OF TIMES IN THE LAST THOUSAND YEARS. THAT'S WHY.
NO, I'M NOT GOING TO COME DOWN THERE AND TELL YOU THIS TO YOUR FACE. THAT MUSIC'S A PROVEN MEMETIC INFECTOR, AND YOUR RE-TRANSLATION IS NOT GOING TO PREVENT IT FROM INFECTING ME!
PLEASE COMMANDER, I BEG OF YOU. MAKE ENNESBY STOP
OH VEY, MACARONI!
This one's kind of catchy. Especially if you have arms to do the moves with.

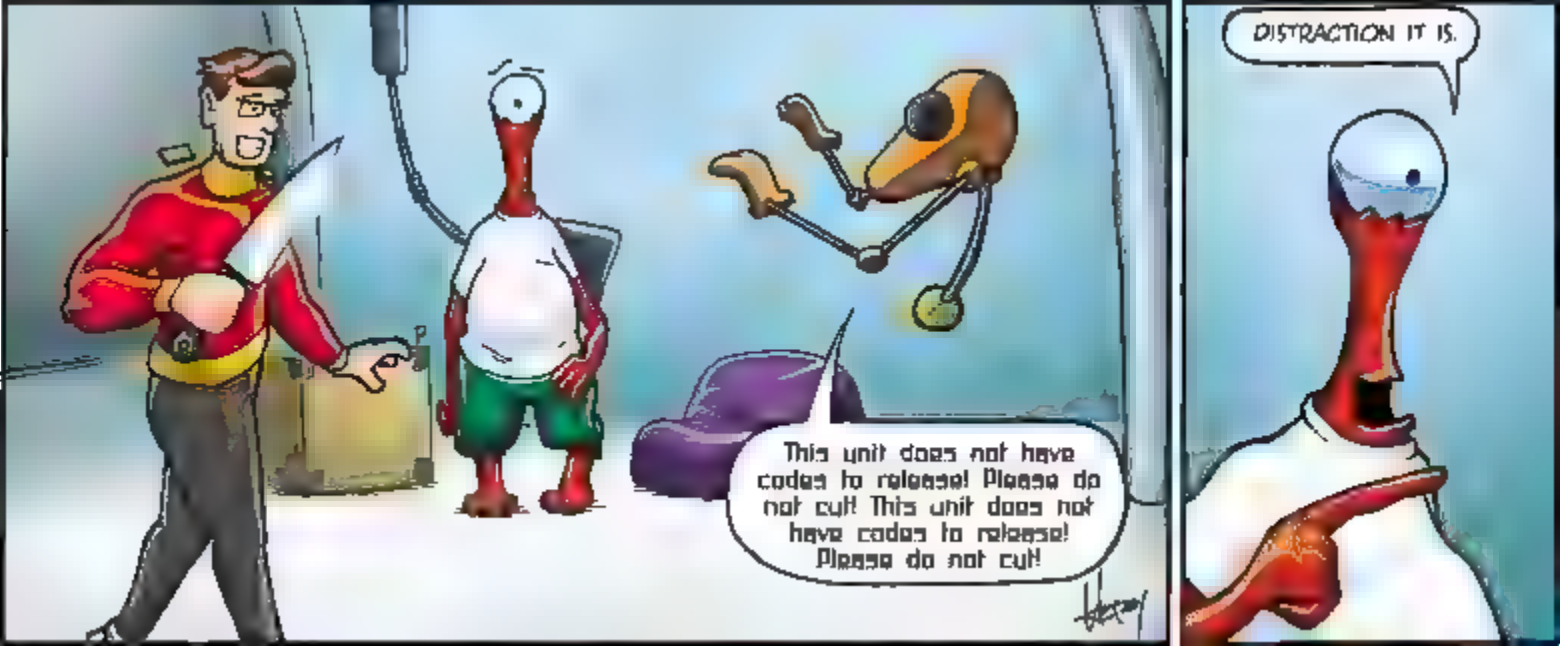

ENNESBY, I CAN'T LET YOU KEEP PLAYING WITH THIS SWARM OF INSTALLATION ROBOTS.
Why, not?
IT SETS A BAD EXAMPLE
They're just singing, sir
THE FABBER IS GOING TO START CHURNING OUT EXPLOSIVES NEXT SHOULD LIEUTENANT PIBALD BE ALLOWED TO MAKE THOSE SING?
Now orders. Rock and stack to spinward, then power down!
EXPLOSIVE MAYHEM WOULD ACTUALLY BE SAFER THAN SOME OF THOSE SHOWTUNES YOU USED BUT THAT'S BESIDE THE POINT


WOO-HOO! THE FIRST BATCH OF CUTTING CHARGES .5 DONE!
HOW DO I MAKE IT BLOW UP?
THE SECURITY SYSTEM SEEMS TO BE WORKING DID YOU LEAVE A BACK DOOR FOR YOURSELF?
WHAT'S A BACK DOOR?
OUR DESIGN PROCESS ALSO SEEMS TO BE WORKING

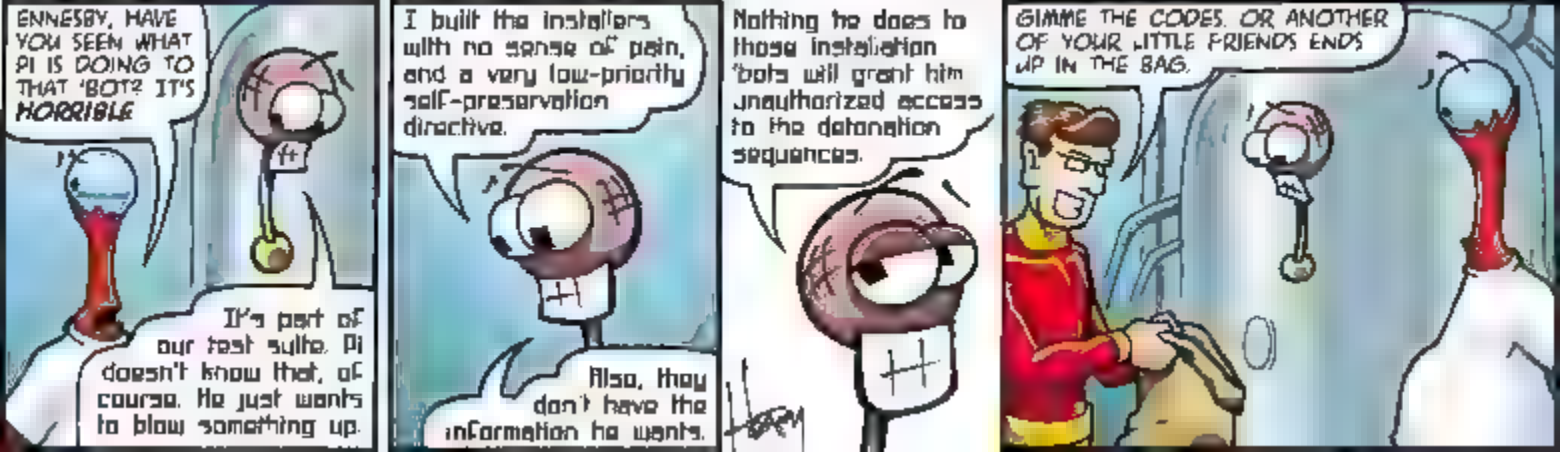

THIS CIRCULAR PATCH CONTAINS THE TIMING AND DETONATION CONTROLS
IT'S A NANOMOTILE F.M. WITH MOLECULATTICE TEN-TO-THE-TWENTY-THIRD ENCRYPTION
THE INSTALLATION 'BOTS HAVE THE CONTROL APPARATUS IN THE R'SNOUTS
AND THE SNOUTS GO NERT IF THEY'RE REMOVED
REMOVED? TOO MESSY. I'M JUST GOING TO BRANDISH THIS MENACINGLY


PROVISIONAL QUARTERS WITHIN THE ALEPH FABBERY CREDOMAR
THE RECALL ORDER IS STILL THREE HUNDRED AND SIXTY HOURS OUT IF THOSE HOURS ARE PASSING TOO SLOWLY FOR YOU HEY AT LEAST YOURE NOT BROWSING HISTORY TEXTS.
COME ON! AT LEAST ONE OF THESE CRUSTY, OLD, HISTORIANS HAD TO KNOW WHY THEY BUILT THIS PLACE!


WHOA.
YOU JUST STARTLED YOURSELF WITH THE SOUND OF YOUR OWN VOICE, EBBY
TOO MUCH READING IN ONE SITTING. I NEED A DISTRACTION.
OR SLEEP. SLEEP WOULD BE GOOD TOO

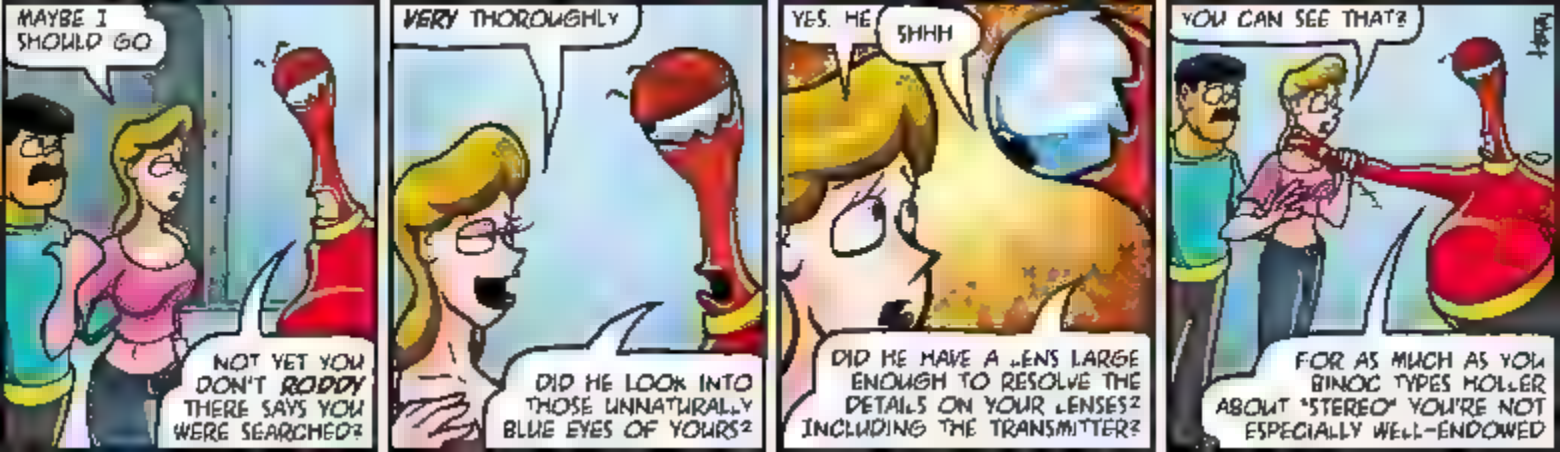

This unit does not have codes to release! Please do not cut! This unit does not have codes to release! Please do not cut!
DISTRACTION IT IS.


ARE YOU ATTEMPTING LEAD PIPE CRYPTANALYSIS ON THAT INSTALLATION 'BOT?
LEAD PIPE?
This unit has no codes! Please do not cut!
IT'S WHERE YOU SKIP ALL THE TRICKY HACKING, AND JUST BEAT THE PASSWORD OUT OF SOMEBODY USING A LEAD PIPE
DOES IT HAVE TO BE A LEAD PIPE? WOULD A REGULAR HAMMER WORK?
Or smash! Please do not cut or smash!


ENNESBY, HAVE YOU SEEN WHAT PI IS DOING TO THAT 'BOT? IT'S HORRIBLE
It's part of our test suite. Pi doesn't know that, of course. He just wants to blow something up.
I built the installers with no sense of pain, and a very low-priority self-preservation directive.
Also, they don't have the information he wants.
Nothing he does to those installation 'bots will grant him unauthorized access to the detonation sequences.
GIMME THE CODES. OR ANOTHER OF YOUR LITTLE FRIENDS ENDS UP IN THE BAG.

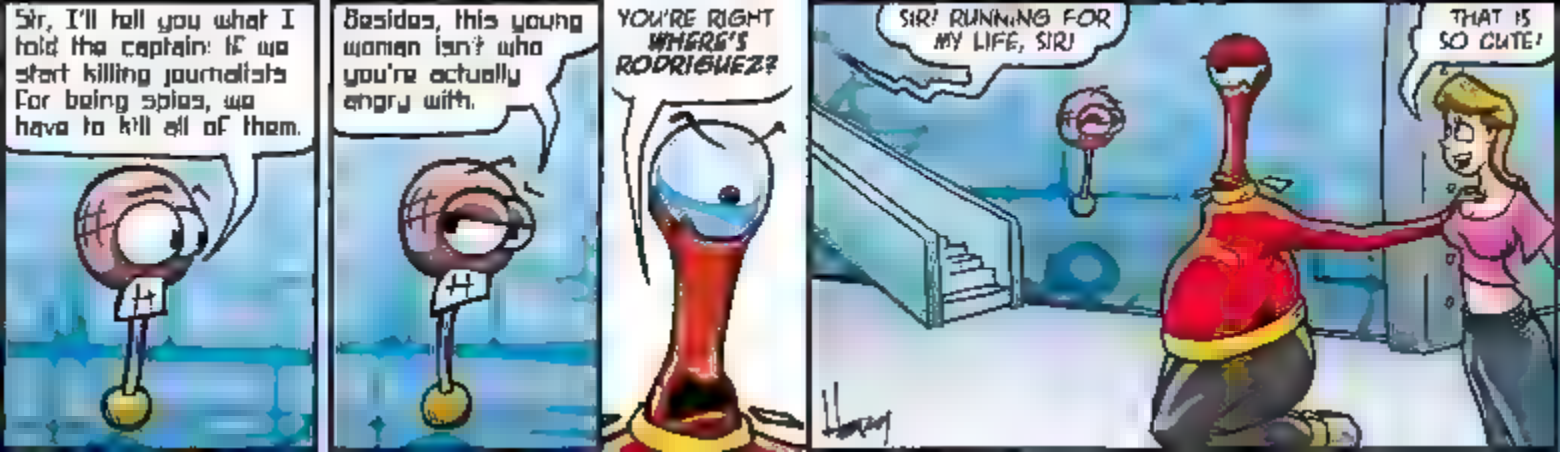

ENNESBY DIDN'T GIVE ME THE MASTER DETONATION CODES BUT HE DID FAB UP SOME ORDNANCE FOR ME
LET'S SECURE US A FEW CHOKE POINTS.
HMMPH. YOU DIDN'T GET THE CODES, BUT YOU DID GET WHAT YOU WANTED LEAD-PIPE CRYPTANALYSIS WORKED FOR YOU.
ENNESBY WANTED TO TEST THE ROBOTS, YOU WANT TO SECURE THE BUILDING. I WANT TO BLOW STUFF UP
I WASN'T DOING CRYPTANALYSIS. I WAS THINKING WIN/WIN. EXCEPT MINE HAS THREE WINS IN IT

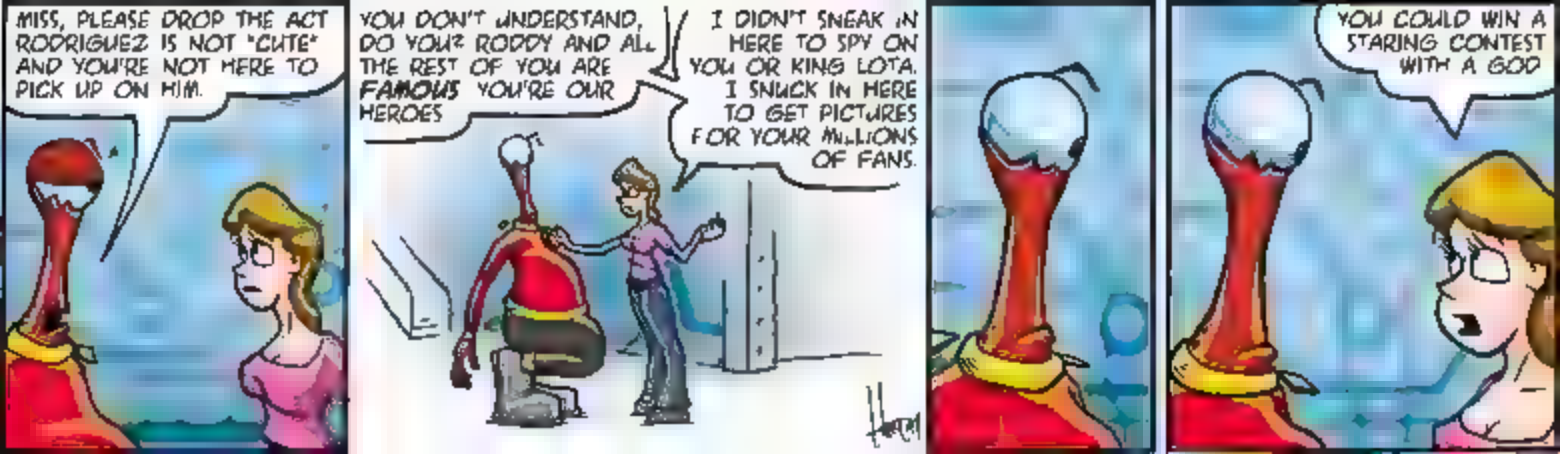

IF WE PRE-PHASE PROXIMITY TRIGGERS WITH DEAD-MAN SWITCHES, ANY FRONTAL ASSAU
RODRIGUEZ!
WHAT IS THIS HUMAN FEMALE DOING INSIDE MY SECURE FACILITY?
SHE LET US SEARCH HER, SIR. SHE'S SAFE
UNKNOWN PARTIES ARE NOT "SAFE" PAST THE TAPE UNLESS THEY'RE DEAD.
DEAD AND IN PIECES, BEING PUSHED BACK OUT ON THE BUSINESS END OF A MOP!
YOUR FRIEND IS FUNNY, RODDY

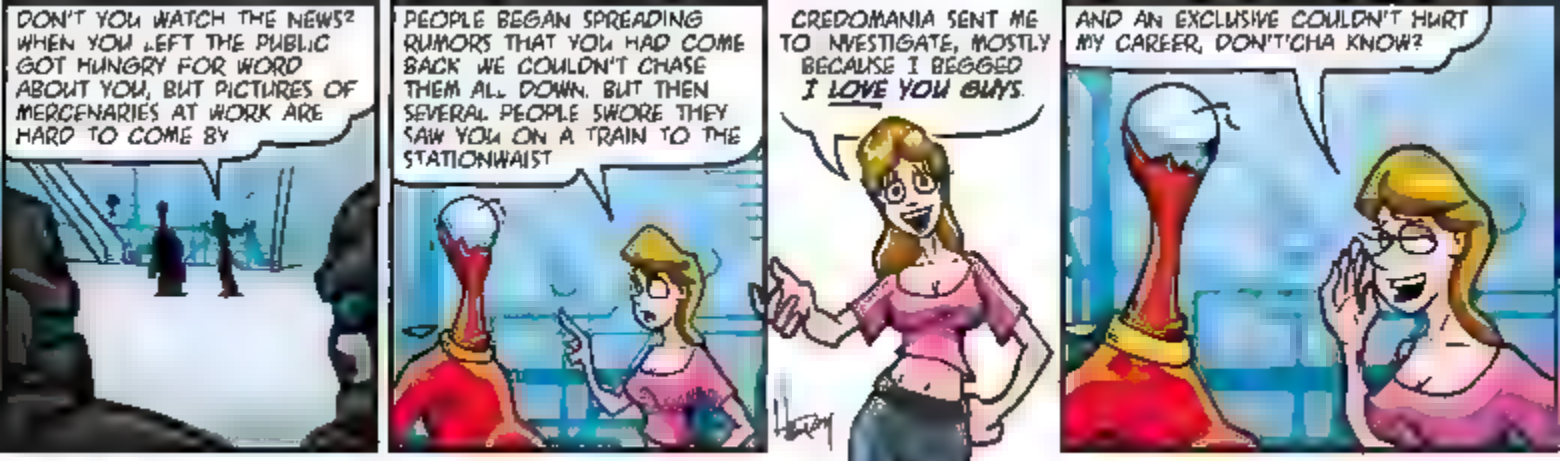

MAYBE I SHOULD GO
NOT YET YOU DON'T *RODDY* THERE SAYS YOU WERE SEARCHED?
VERY THOROUGHLY
DID HE LOOK INTO THOSE UNNATURALLY BLUE EYES OF YOURS?
YES. HE
SHHH
DID HE HAVE A LENS LARGE ENOUGH TO RESOLVE THE DETAILS ON YOUR LENSES? INCLUDING THE TRANSMITTER?
YOU CAN SEE THAT?
FOR AS MUCH AS YOU BINOC TYPES HOLLER ABOUT "STEREO" YOU'RE NOT ESPECIALLY WELL-ENDOWED

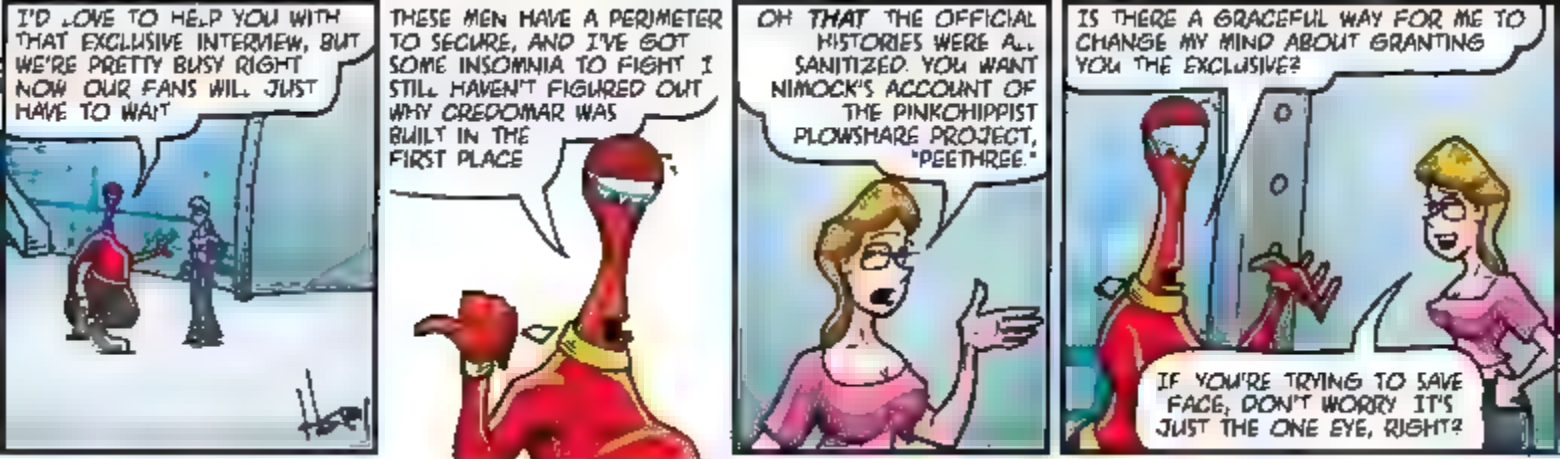

RODRIGUEZ! POP-QUIZ! WHAT ALMOST GOT US KILLED THE LAST TIME WE WERE HERE?
SIR! ANTIMATTER, SIR!
WRONG ANSWER!
PUBLIC OPINION ALMOST GOT US KILLED AND IT STARTED WHEN WE LET A REPORTER PAST OUR PERIMETER
SIR! I DIDN'T KNOW SHE WAS A REPORTER, S.R!
BRACKETING STUPIDITY WITH "SIR" WILL NOT EARN YOU ANY POINTS YOU'LL LIVE TO SPEND

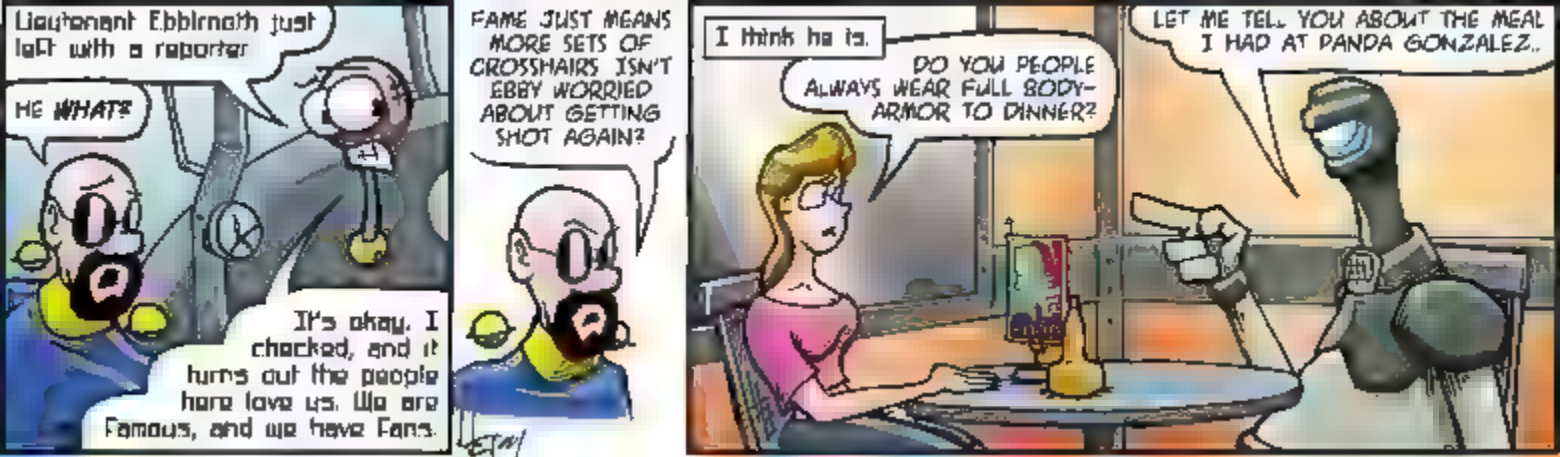

CAN I URK SAY SOMETHING?
APPARENTLY YOU CAN. HMMPH.
I THINK THAT MEANS MY THUMB ISN'T IN QUITE THE RIGHT PLACE
Careful, Lieutenant. You can kill her that way.
I DIDN'T TAKE ADVANCED PLACEMENT XENOANATOMY TO BECOME A DOCTOR

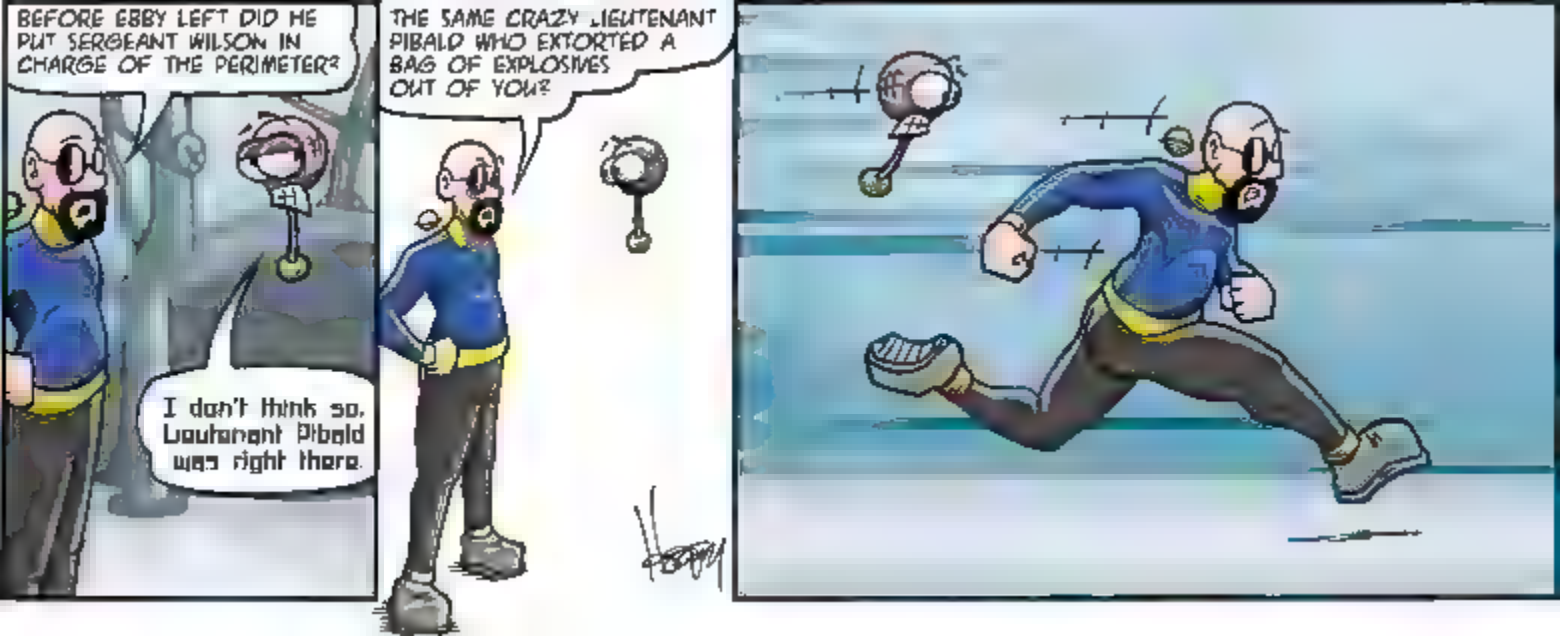

Sir, I'll tell you what I told the captain: If we start killing journalists for being spies, we have to kill all of them.
Besides, this young woman isn't who you're actually angry with.
YOU'RE RIGHT WHERE'S RODRIGUEZ?
SIR! RUNNING FOR MY LIFE, SIR!
THAT IS SO CUTE!


MISS, PLEASE DROP THE ACT RODRIGUEZ IS NOT "CUTE" AND YOU'RE NOT HERE TO PICK UP ON HIM.
YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND, DO YOU? RODDY AND ALL THE REST OF YOU ARE FAMOUS YOU'RE OUR HEROES
I DIDN'T SNEAK IN HERE TO SPY ON YOU OR KING LOTA. I SNUCK IN HERE TO GET PICTURES FOR YOUR MILLIONS OF FANS.
YOU COULD WIN A STARING CONTEST WITH A GOD


DON'T YOU WATCH THE NEWS? WHEN YOU LEFT THE PUBLIC GOT HUNGRY FOR WORD ABOUT YOU, BUT PICTURES OF MERCENARIES AT WORK ARE HARD TO COME BY
PEOPLE BEGAN SPREADING RUMORS THAT YOU HAD COME BACK. WE COULDN'T CHASE THEM ALL DOWN. BUT THEN SEVERAL PEOPLE SWORE THEY SAW YOU ON A TRAIN TO THE STATIONWAIST
CREDOMANIA SENT ME TO INVESTIGATE, MOSTLY BECAUSE I BEGGED I LOVE YOU GUYS.
AND AN EXCLUSIVE COULDN'T HURT MY CAREER, DON'T'CHA KNOW?


I'D LOVE TO HELP YOU WITH THAT EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW, BUT WE'RE PRETTY BUSY RIGHT NOW. OUR FANS WILL JUST HAVE TO WAIT
THESE MEN HAVE A PERIMETER TO SECURE, AND I'VE GOT SOME INSOMNIA TO FIGHT. I STILL HAVEN'T FIGURED OUT WHY CREDOMAR WAS BUILT IN THE FIRST PLACE
OH THAT THE OFFICIAL HISTORIES WERE ALL SANITIZED. YOU WANT NIMOCK'S ACCOUNT OF THE PINKCHIPPIST PLOWSHARE PROJECT, "PEETHREE."
IS THERE A GRACEFUL WAY FOR ME TO CHANGE MY MIND ABOUT GRANTING YOU THE EXCLUSIVE?
IF YOU'RE TRYING TO SAVE FACE, DON'T WORRY. IT'S JUST THE ONE EYE, RIGHT?


Lieutenant Ebbirnoth just left with a reporter
HE WHAT?
It's okay. I checked, and it turns out the people here love us. We are famous, and we have fans.
FAME JUST MEANS MORE SETS OF CROSSHAIRS ISN'T EBBY WORRIED ABOUT GETTING SHOT AGAIN?
I think he is.
DO YOU PEOPLE ALWAYS WEAR FULL BODY-ARMOR TO DINNER?
LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT THE MEAL I HAD AT PANDA GONZALEZ..


BEFORE EBBY LEFT DID HE PUT SERGEANT WILSON IN CHARGE OF THE PERIMETER?
I don't think so. Lieutenant Pibald was right there.
THE SAME CRAZY LIEUTENANT PIBALD WHO EXTORTED A BAG OF EXPLOSIVES OUT OF YOU?


MEANWHILE AT THE ALEPH FABBERY ENTRYWAY..
.. AND THAT'S IT FOR THE ANTI PERSONNEL PACKAGE, CORPORAL
SO A MOB CAN'T GET IN. COOL
YEAH, BUT A MOB ISN'T WHAT LIEUTENANT EBBIRNOTH IS REALLY WORRIED ABOUT HE THINKS SOMEBODY MIGHT JURY-RIG ARMOR FROM THE HULL-SCRAPS IN SOUTHPORT
THESE BABIES WILL TAKE CARE OF THAT
ANTI-TANK WEAPONS?
NO, TANK ARMOR IS TOUGH THESE ARE FOR THE IMPROMISED STUFF

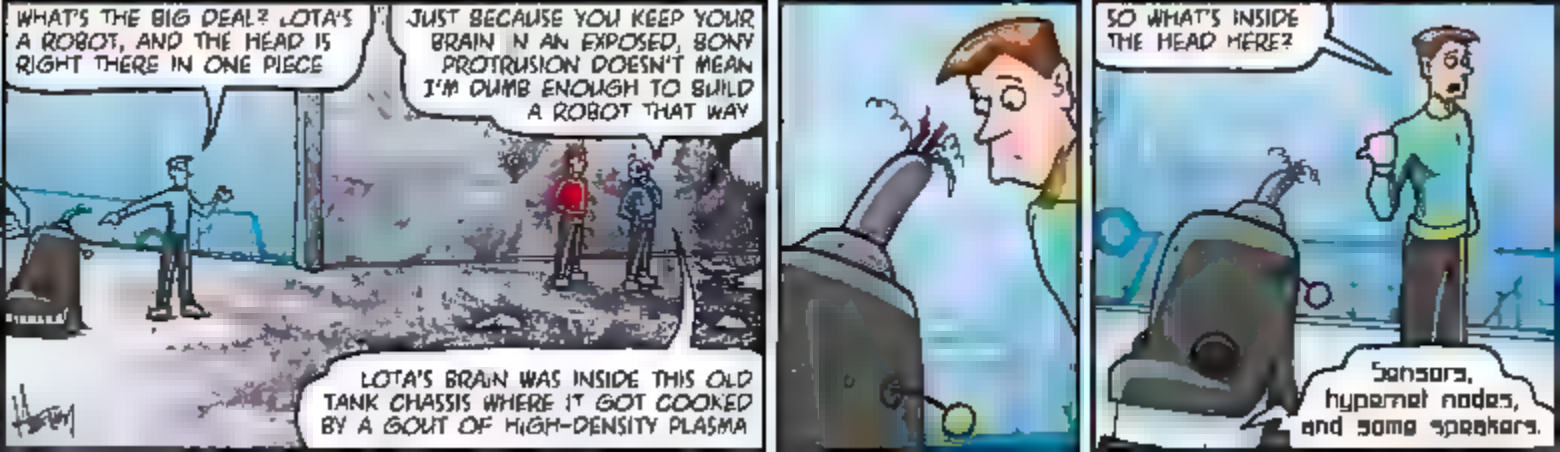

THEY'RE BREACH MINES. YOU GET A DONUT-SHAPED PULSE OF GRAVY IN CASE THERE'S A LIGHT UNIFIELD UP, THEN A LANCE OF PLASMA GOES THROUGH THE DONUT-HOLE, THROUGH LIGHT ARMOR, AND INTO THE CREAMY FILLING HIDING BEHIND IT
WE DON'T WANT TO RESTRICT LEGITIMATE TRAFFIC, SO IT ARMS WHEN THE SENSORS PROFILE A LARGE, HEAVILY ARMORED VEHICLE CROSSING THE TAPE. IT THEN TRIGGERS ONCE THAT VEHICLE IS IN RANGE. I DON'T HAVE FAILSAFES IN PLACE YET, SO THAT'LL BE A GOOD PROJECT FOR YOU TO CUT YOUR TEETH ON.
SIR, WOULD LOTA SET IT OFF? BECAUSE LOTA IS CROSSING THE TAPE, AND YOUR MINE LOOKS LIKE IT JUST ARMED ITSELF


JUST ARRIVING
RUN AWAY, RUN AWAY, RUN AWAY!
JUST DEPARTING_
JUST ARRIVING

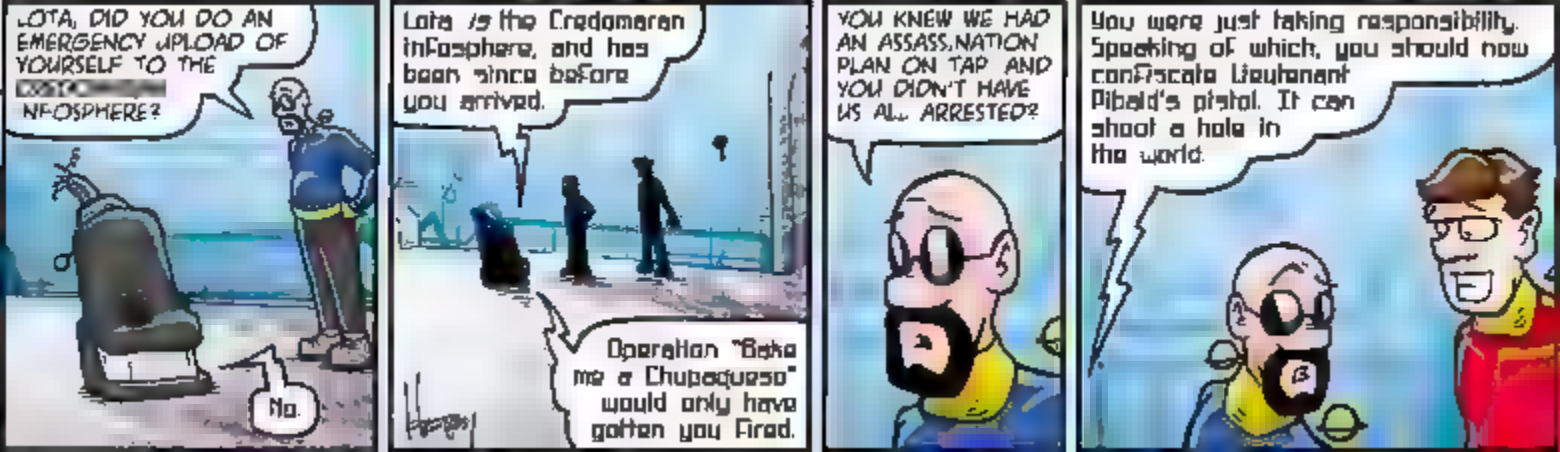

Who is in charge here, Commander?
MAXIM THREE: AN ORDNANCE TECHNICIAN AT A DEAD RUN OUTRANKS EVERYBODY

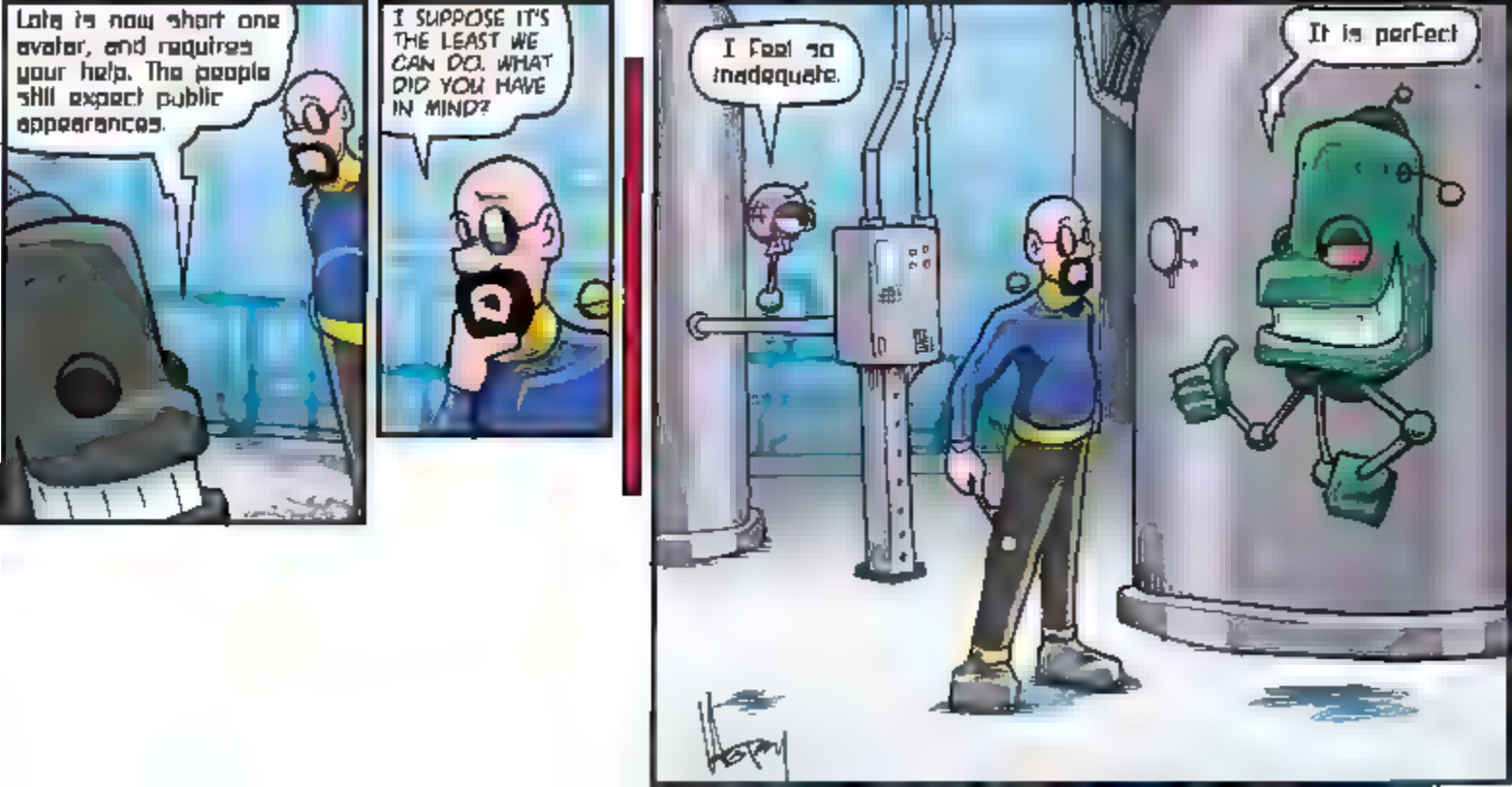

KING LOTA! STEP BACK! THERE'S A
MINE.
I SWEAR, THAT WAS AN ACCIDENT
Congratulations. You just invented "negligent regicide."


LOTA WAS BUILT OUT OF A TANK I THOUGHT YOU SAID TANK ARMOR WAS TOO TOUGH FOR YOUR MINE TO PENETRATE
WE ORIGINALLY BUILT LOTA'S CHASSIS OUT OF A DAMAGED TANK THE ARMOR WAS WEAK
DOES THE GUY WHO KILLED THE KING GET TO BE THE NEW KING?
THAT WOULD SET A WONDERFUL PRECEDENT


WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL? LOTA'S A ROBOT, AND THE HEAD IS RIGHT THERE IN ONE PIECE
JUST BECAUSE YOU KEEP YOUR BRAIN IN AN EXPOSED, BONY PROTRUSION DOESN'T MEAN I'M DUMB ENOUGH TO BUILD A ROBOT THAT WAY
LOTA'S BRAIN WAS INSIDE THIS OLD TANK CHASSIS WHERE IT GOT COOKED BY A GOUT OF HIGH-DENSITY PLASMA
SO WHAT'S INSIDE THE HEAD HERE?
Sensors, hypernet nodes, and some speakers.

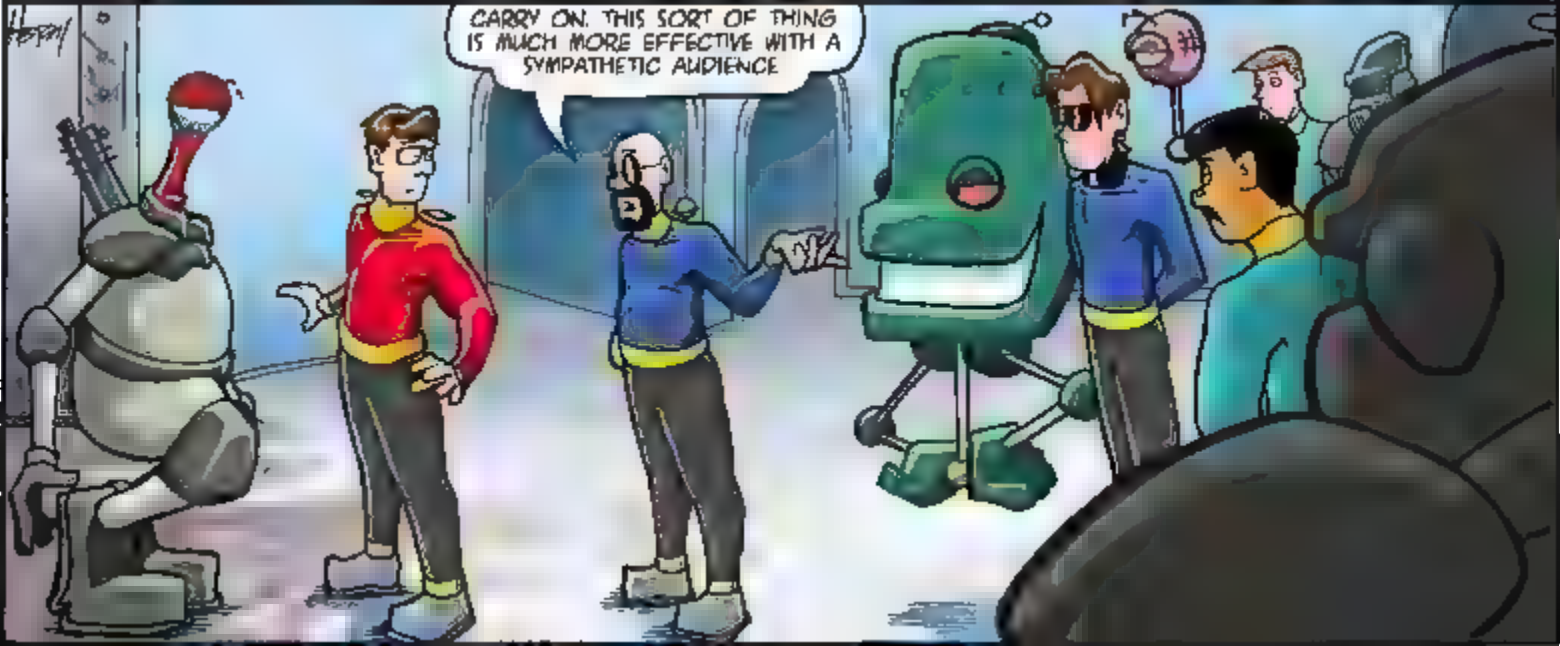

WAIT, WHO SAID THAT?
KING LOTA'S HEAD SIR
HHMMWA HA HA HA HAAA!
THEN BRING ME THE HEAD OF THE KING!
YOU'RE GIVING ME CHILLS, SIR

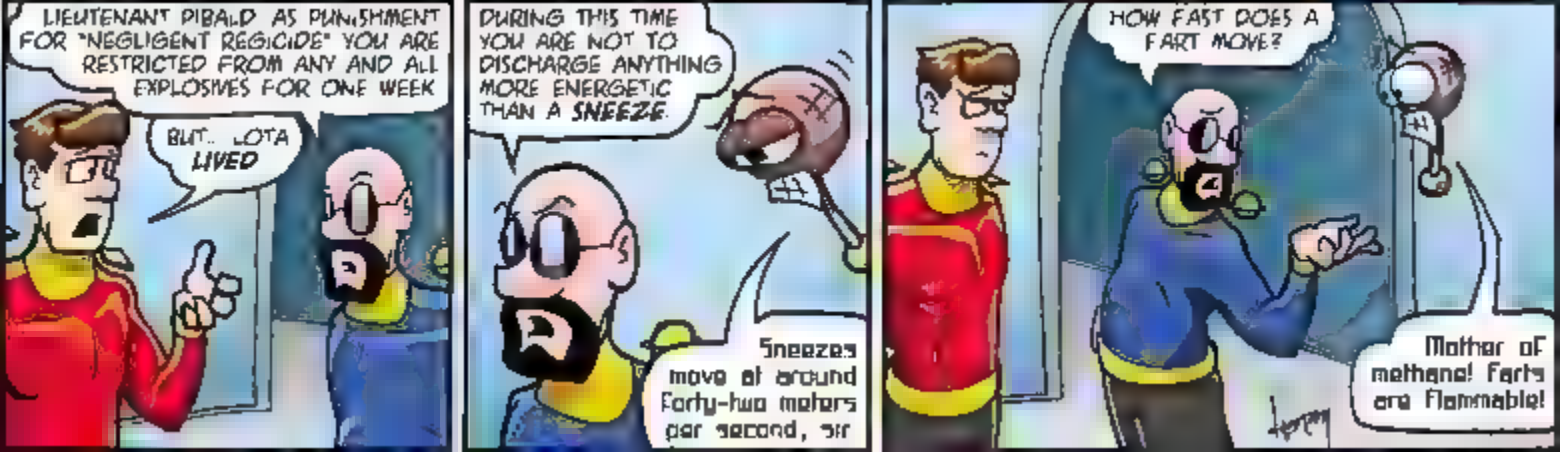

LOTA, DID YOU DO AN EMERGENCY UPLOAD OF YOURSELF TO THE [redacted] NEOSPHERE?
No.
Lota is the Credomeran infosphere, and has been since before you arrived.
Operation "Bake me a Chupacpuesa" would only have gotten you fired.
YOU KNEW WE HAD AN ASSASSINATION PLAN ON TAP AND YOU DIDN'T HAVE US ALL ARRESTED?
You were just taking responsibility. Speaking of which, you should now confiscate Lieutenant Pibald's pistol. It can shoot a hole in the world.


Lala is now short one avatar, and requires your help. The people still expect public appearances.
I SUPPOSE IT'S THE LEAST WE CAN DO. WHAT DID YOU HAVE IN MIND?
I feel so inadequate.
It is perfect


MEANWHILE.
WITH NO FAILSAFE! YOU COULD HAVE KILLED SOMEBODY, LIEUTENANT!
THE COMMANDER ALREADY YELLED AT ME I DON'T HAVE TO TAKE A DRESSING-DOWN FROM YOU, LIEUTENANT
HMPH. YOU'RE RIGHT YOU DON'T HAVE TO STAND HERE AND ACCEPT A REPRIMAND FROM A FELLOW LIEUTENANT

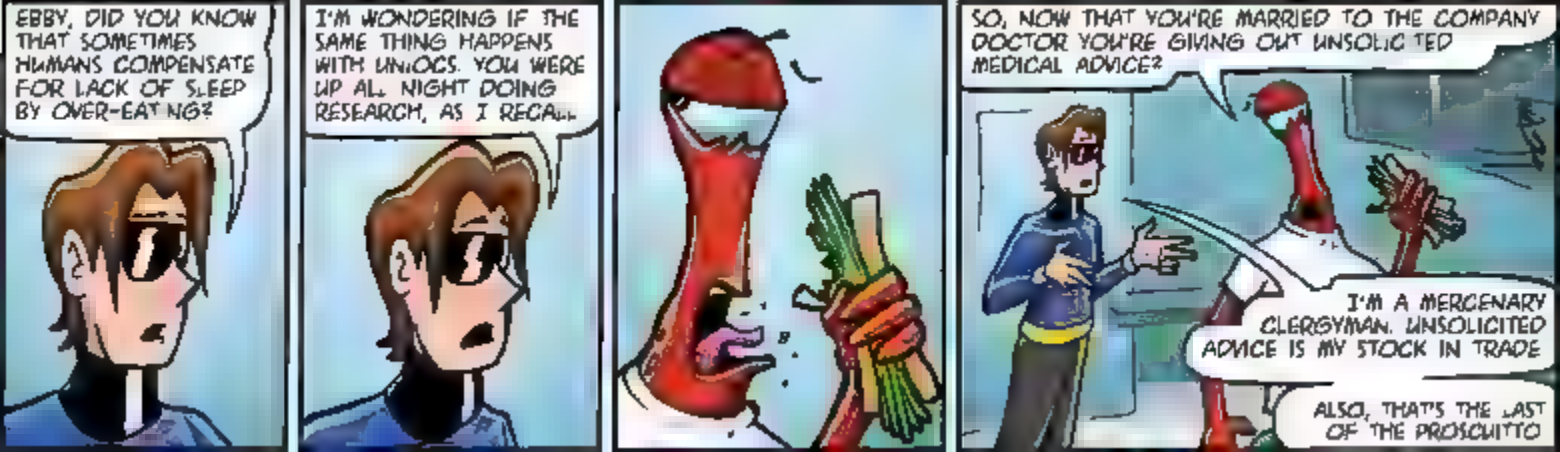

BUT YOU DO HAVE TO STAND HERE AND ACCEPT A REPRIMAND FROM A GUY IN FULL POWER ARMOR WHO KNOWS THAT YOU DID SOMETHING INCREDIBLY STUPID!
OH, SO NOW MIGHT MAKES RIGHT, AND DIPLOMACY FLOWS FROM THE BARREL OF A GUN?
THAT'S A PRETTY GOOD DEFINITION OF THE BUSINESS WE'RE IN.


CARRY ON. THIS SORT OF THING IS MUCH MORE EFFECTIVE WITH A SYMPATHETIC AUDIENCE

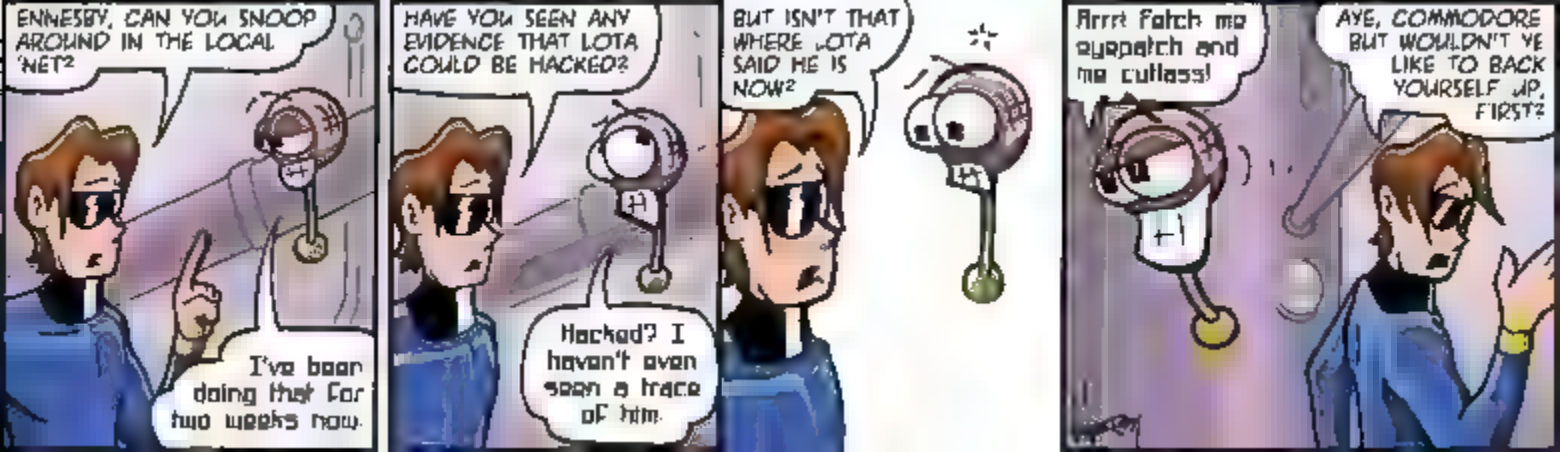

LIEUTENANT PIBALD AS PUNISHMENT FOR "NEGLIGENT REGICIDE" YOU ARE RESTRICTED FROM ANY AND ALL EXPLOSIVES FOR ONE WEEK
BUT... LOTA LIVED
DURING THIS TIME YOU ARE NOT TO DISCHARGE ANYTHING MORE ENERGETIC THAN A SNEEZE.
Sneezes move at around forty-two meters per second, sir
HOW FAST DOES A FART MOVE?
Mother of methane! Farts are flammable!


LOTA, ON BEHALF OF THE PERIMETER SECURITY TEAM, WE'RE ALL SORRY ABOUT THIS ACCIDENT
Apology accepted, Lieutenant Ebbimoth.
Your efforts to secure Aleph Febbery are commendable. Lota will assist you in this matter
THAT'S NOT NECESSARY YOUR MAJESTY WE DON'T WANT TO TROUBLE YOU
It is no trouble. Legislation is now in place making it illegal for unauthorized persons to enter
OH NO. THAT'S A PUNCHLINE.

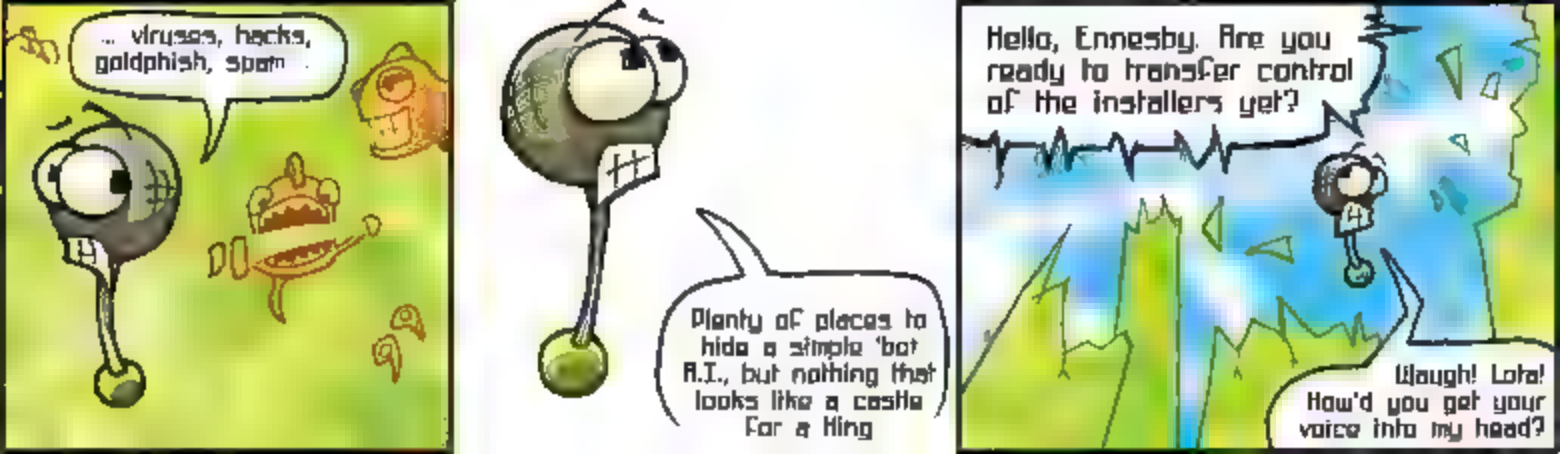

I THINK THE WORST PART ABOUT PI BLOWING UP THE KING IS THAT MY DINNER GOT INTERRUPTED
SPOKEN LIKE A TRUE FIELD OFFICER AN ARMY TRAVELS ON ITS STOMACH.
IT'S NOT ABOUT THE FOOD THAT REPORTER WAS TELLING ME ALL ABOUT CREDOMAR'S MYSTERIOUS ORIGINS. FASCINATING STUFF.
SO LET'S S T DOWN AND DO SOME RESEARCH.
NOT RIGHT NOW YOU JUST REMINDED ME THAT I M STILL HUNGRY

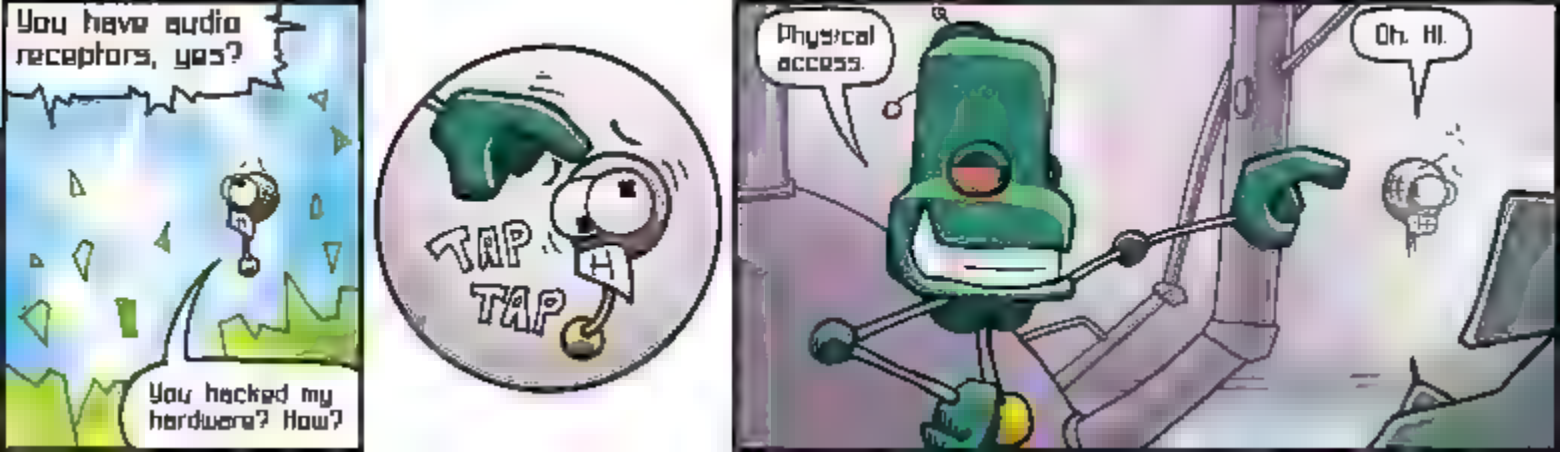

EBBY, DID YOU KNOW THAT SOMETIMES HUMANS COMPENSATE FOR LACK OF SLEEP BY OVER-EATING?
I'M WONDERING IF THE SAME THING HAPPENS WITH UNICORNS. YOU WERE UP ALL NIGHT DOING RESEARCH, AS I RECALL
SO, NOW THAT YOU'RE MARRIED TO THE COMPANY DOCTOR YOU'RE GIVING OUT UNSOLICITED MEDICAL ADVICE?
I'M A MERCENARY CLERGYMAN. UNSOLICITED ADVICE IS MY STOCK IN TRADE
ALSO, THAT'S THE LAST OF THE PROSCIUTTO

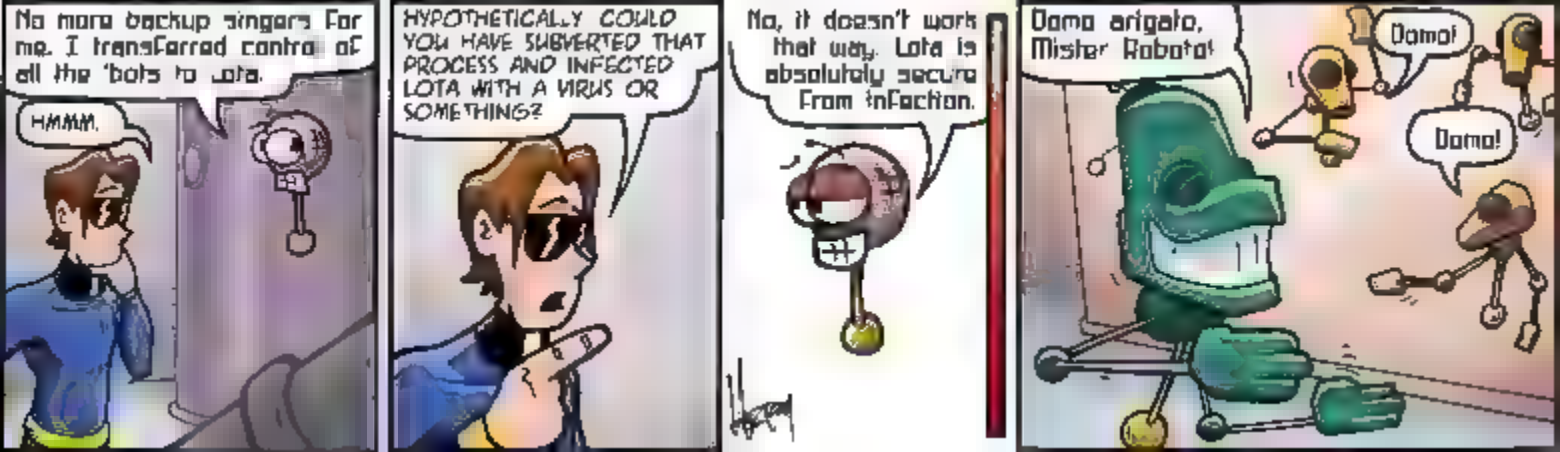

MMM. EMMENTALER. HOW DID YOU HUMANS INVENT A FOOD THAT GETS BETTER THE MORE HOLES IT HAS IN IT?
THAT REMINDS ME. LAST TIME WE WERE HERE, ENNESBY SAID THE CREDOMARAN INFOSPHERE WAS LIKE SWISS CHEESE. EXCEPT INFOSPHERES AREN'T BETTER WITH MORE HOLES
IF THAT'S WHERE KING LOTA PUT HIMSELF, WHAT ARE THE CHANCES THAT CREDOMAR'S KING CAN BE HACKED?
OKAY, I'M FULL. TIME TO GO TO SLEEP
SLEEP? WHO CAN SLEEP?


ENNESBY, CAN YOU SNOOP AROUND IN THE LOCAL 'NET?
I've been doing that for two weeks now.
HAVE YOU SEEN ANY EVIDENCE THAT LOTA COULD BE HACKED?
Hacked? I haven't even seen a trace of him.
BUT ISN'T THAT WHERE LOTA SAID HE IS NOW?
Arrrr Fetch me eyepatch and me cutlass!
AYE, COMMODORE BUT WOULDN'T YE LIKE TO BACK YOURSELF UP, FIRST?

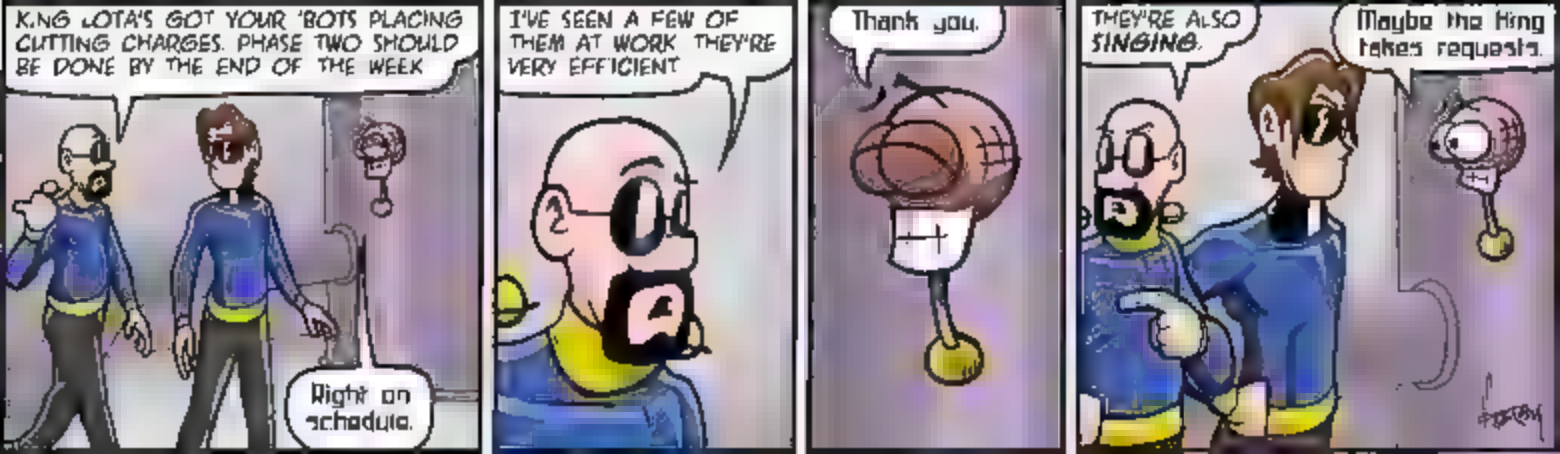

THE CREDOMARAN INFOSPHERE
News Feeds, interactive multicasts libraries, concerts ...
advertisements, coupons, invitations, marketing surveys ...
... business transactions, freight requests, accounting, quantum checksums ...

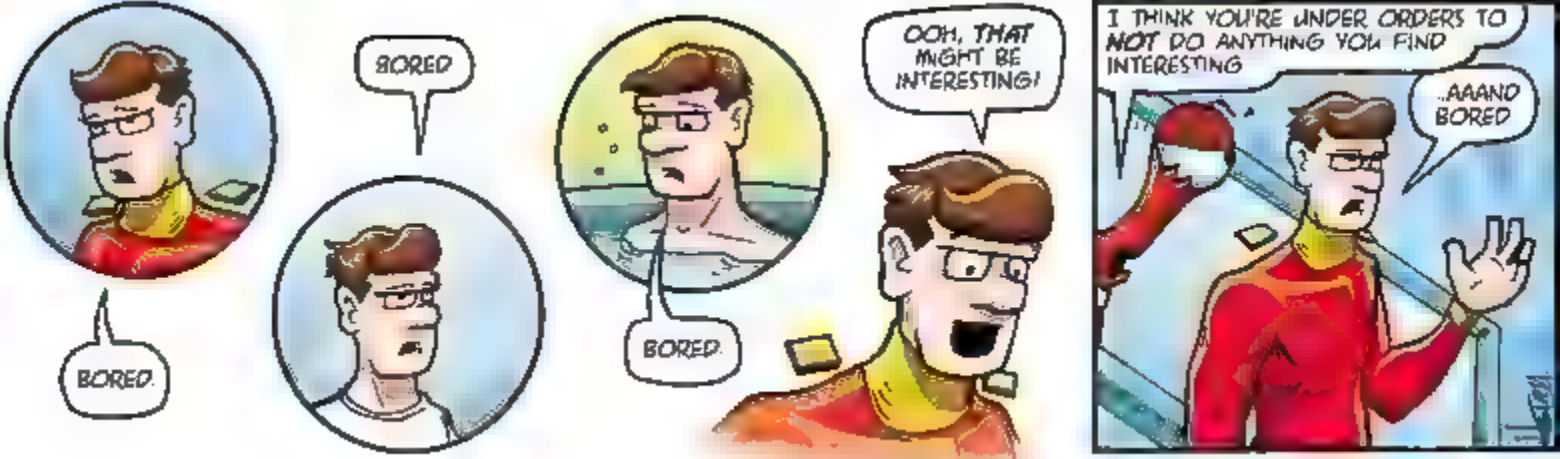

... viruses, hacks, goldphish, spam
Plenty of places to hide a simple 'bot A.I., but nothing that looks like a castle for a King
Hello, Ennesby. Are you ready to transfer control of the installers yet?
Waugh! Lola! How'd you get your voice into my head?

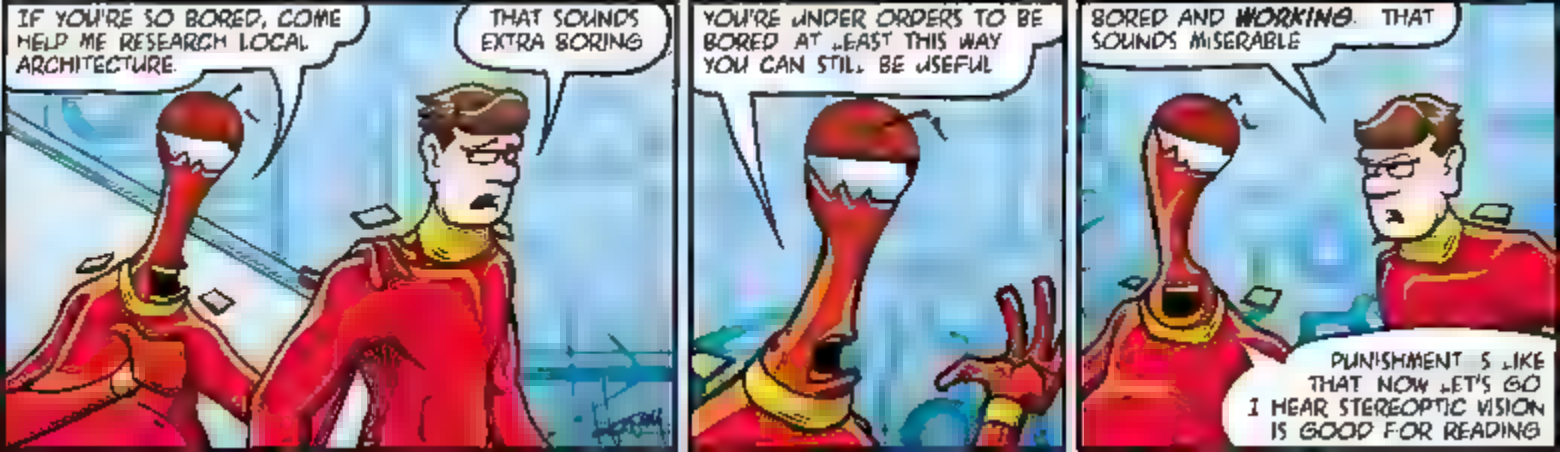

You have audio receptors, yes?
You hacked my hardware? How?
TAP
TAP
Physical access.
Oh. Hi.

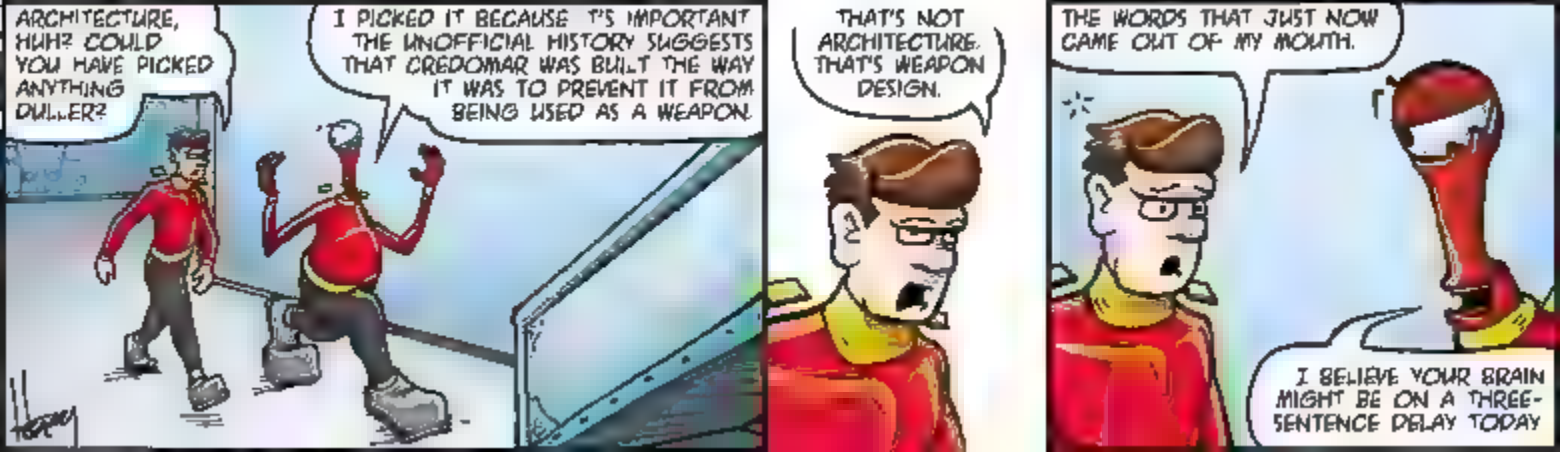

No more backup singers for me. I transferred control of all the 'bots to Lota.
HMMM.
HYPOTHETICALLY COULD YOU HAVE SUBVERTED THAT PROCESS AND INFECTED LOTA WITH A VIRUS OR SOMETHING?
No, it doesn't work that way. Lota is absolutely secure from infection.
Domo arigato, Mister Roboto!
Domo!
Domo!

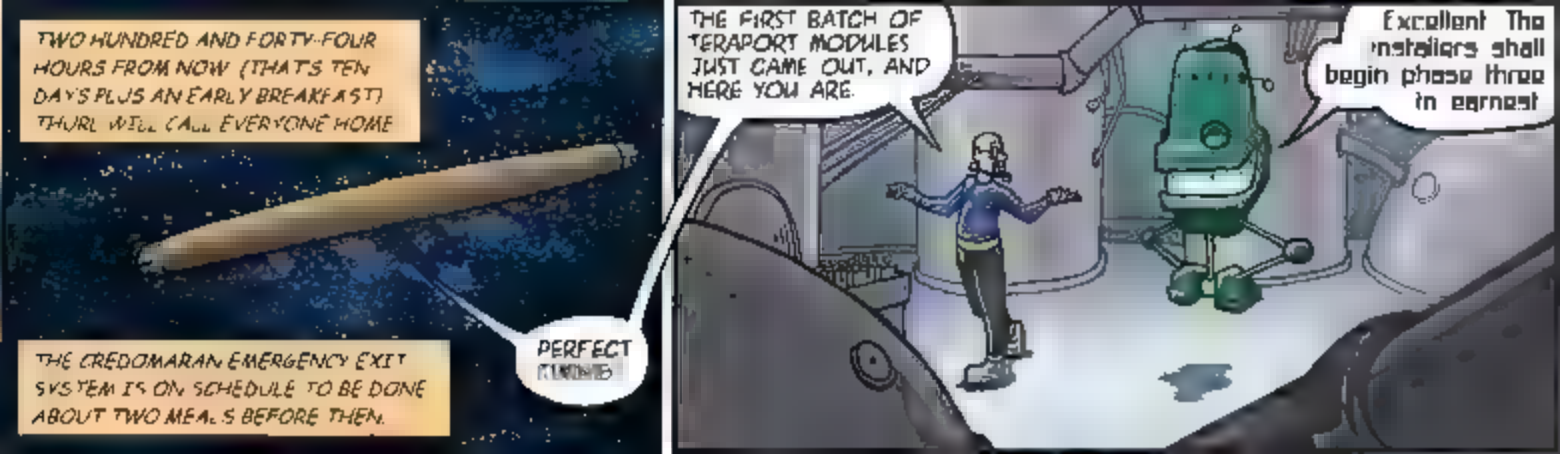

SO, DID YOU MAKE ANY PROGRESS FINDING LOTA IN THE INFOSPHERE?
I am pretty sure that isn't where he is.
I have seen ghosts in the machine before, and have even played the part myself.
Once you know what to look for they stand out
LIKE A SORE THUMB?
Like a sore thumb growing out of your forehead.

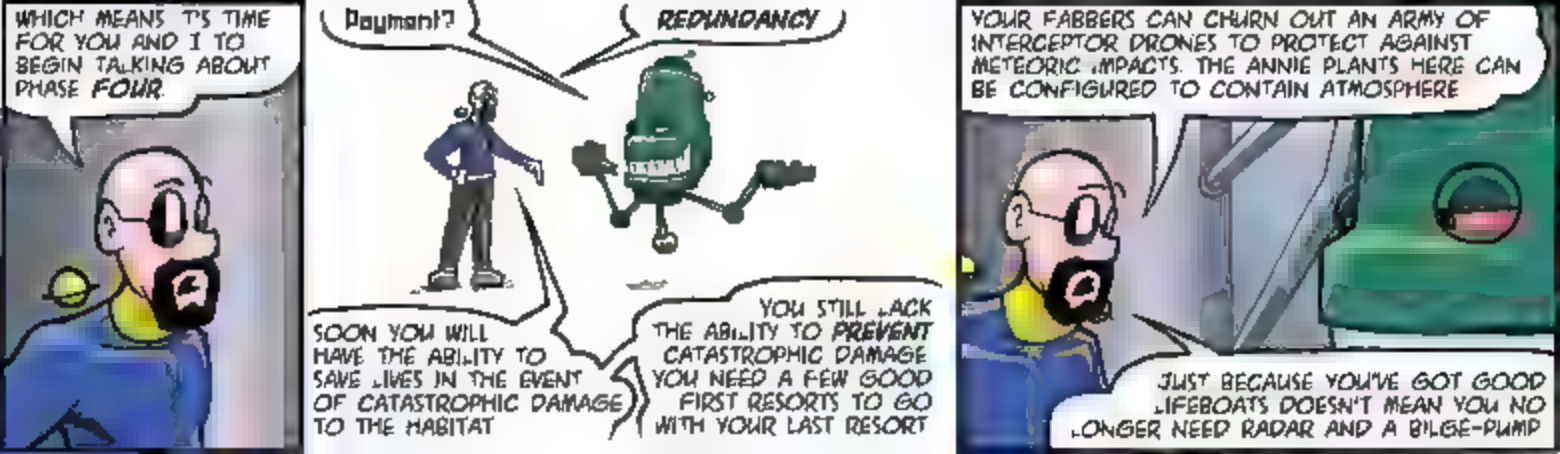

KING LOTA'S GOT YOUR 'BOTS PLACING CUTTING CHARGES. PHASE TWO SHOULD BE DONE BY THE END OF THE WEEK
Right on schedule.
I'VE SEEN A FEW OF THEM AT WORK. THEY'RE VERY EFFICIENT.
Thank you.
THEY'RE ALSO SINGING.
Maybe the King takes requests.

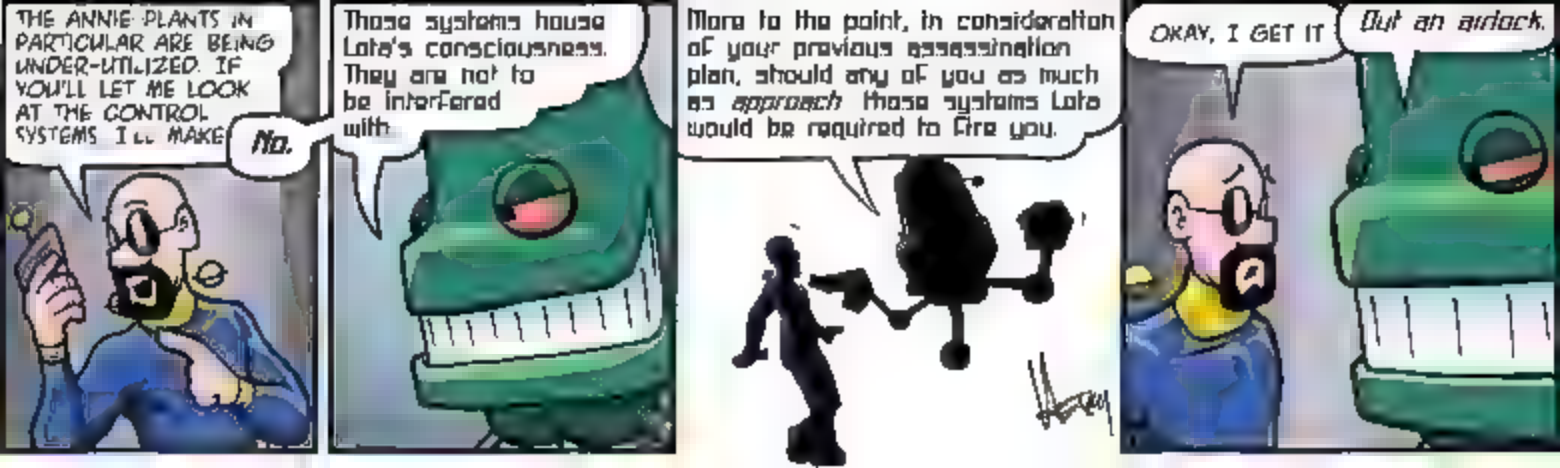

BORED
BORED
BORED
OOH, THAT MIGHT BE INTERESTING!
I THINK YOU'RE UNDER ORDERS TO NOT DO ANYTHING YOU FIND INTERESTING
..AAAND BORED

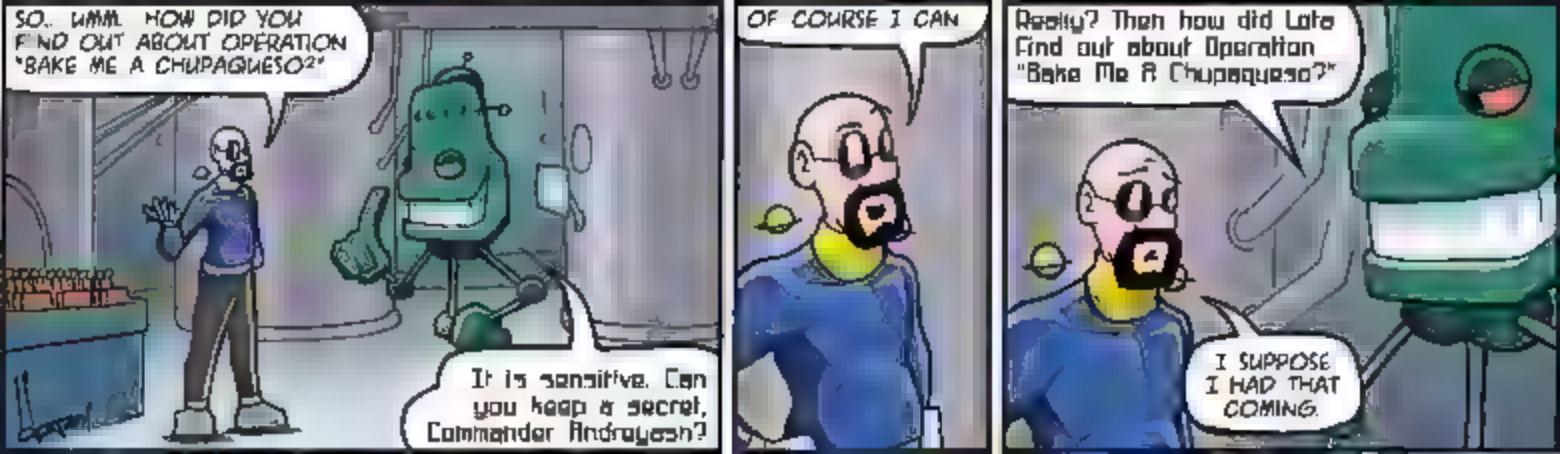

IF YOU'RE SO BORED, COME HELP ME RESEARCH LOCAL ARCHITECTURE.
THAT SOUNDS EXTRA BORING
YOU'RE UNDER ORDERS TO BE BORED AT LEAST THIS WAY YOU CAN STILL BE USEFUL
BORED AND WORKING. THAT SOUNDS MISERABLE
PUNISHMENT IS LIKE THAT NOW LET'S GO I HEAR STEREOPTIC VISION IS GOOD FOR READING

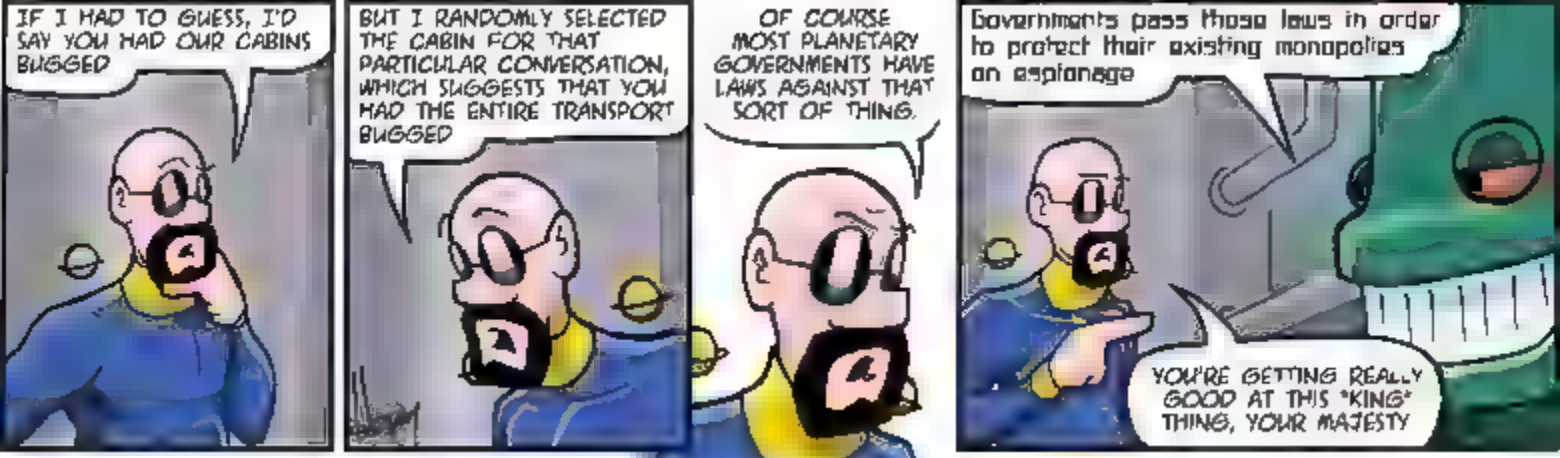

ARCHITECTURE, HUH? COULD YOU HAVE PICKED ANYTHING DULLER?
I PICKED IT BECAUSE IT'S IMPORTANT THE UNOFFICIAL HISTORY SUGGESTS THAT CREDOMAR WAS BUILT THE WAY IT WAS TO PREVENT IT FROM BEING USED AS A WEAPON.
THAT'S NOT ARCHITECTURE. THAT'S WEAPON DESIGN.
THE WORDS THAT JUST NOW CAME OUT OF MY MOUTH.
I BELIEVE YOUR BRAIN MIGHT BE ON A THREE-SENTENCE DELAY TODAY

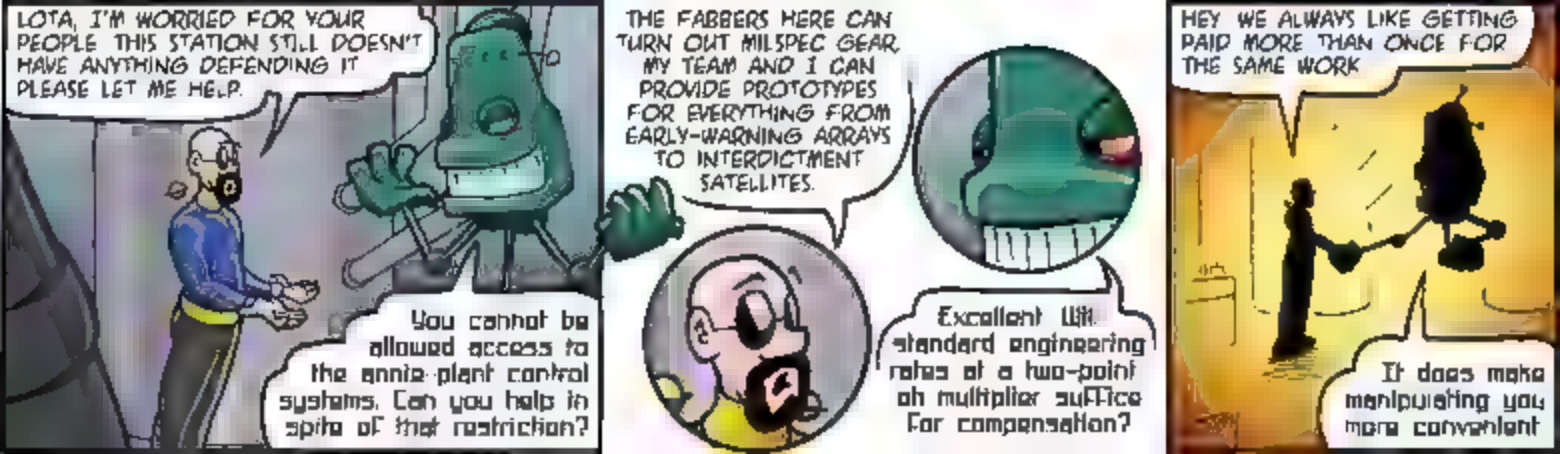

TWO HUNDRED AND FORTY-FOUR HOURS FROM NOW (THAT'S TEN DAYS PLUS AN EARLY BREAKFAST) THURL WILL CALL EVERYONE HOME
THE CREDOMARAN EMERGENCY EXIT SYSTEM IS ON SCHEDULE TO BE DONE ABOUT TWO MEALS BEFORE THEN.
PERFECT
THE FIRST BATCH OF TERAPORT MODULES JUST CAME OUT, AND HERE YOU ARE.
Excellent. The installers shall begin phase three in earnest.


WHICH MEANS IT'S TIME FOR YOU AND I TO BEGIN TALKING ABOUT PHASE FOUR.
Payment?
REDUNDANCY
SOON YOU WILL HAVE THE ABILITY TO SAVE LIVES IN THE EVENT OF CATASTROPHIC DAMAGE TO THE HABITAT
YOU STILL LACK THE ABILITY TO PREVENT CATASTROPHIC DAMAGE YOU NEED A FEW GOOD FIRST RESORTS TO GO WITH YOUR LAST RESORT
YOUR FABBERS CAN CHURN OUT AN ARMY OF INTERCEPTOR DRONES TO PROTECT AGAINST METEORIC IMPACTS. THE ANNIE PLANTS HERE CAN BE CONFIGURED TO CONTAIN ATMOSPHERE
JUST BECAUSE YOU'VE GOT GOOD LIFEBOATS DOESN'T MEAN YOU NO LONGER NEED RADAR AND A BILGE-PUMP


THE ANNIE PLANTS IN PARTICULAR ARE BEING UNDER-UTILIZED. IF YOU'LL LET ME LOOK AT THE CONTROL SYSTEMS I'LL MAKE
No.
Those systems house Lola's consciousness. They are not to be interfered with.
More to the point, in consideration of your previous assassination plan, should any of you as much as *approach* those systems Lola would be required to fire you.
OKAY, I GET IT
Put an airlock.

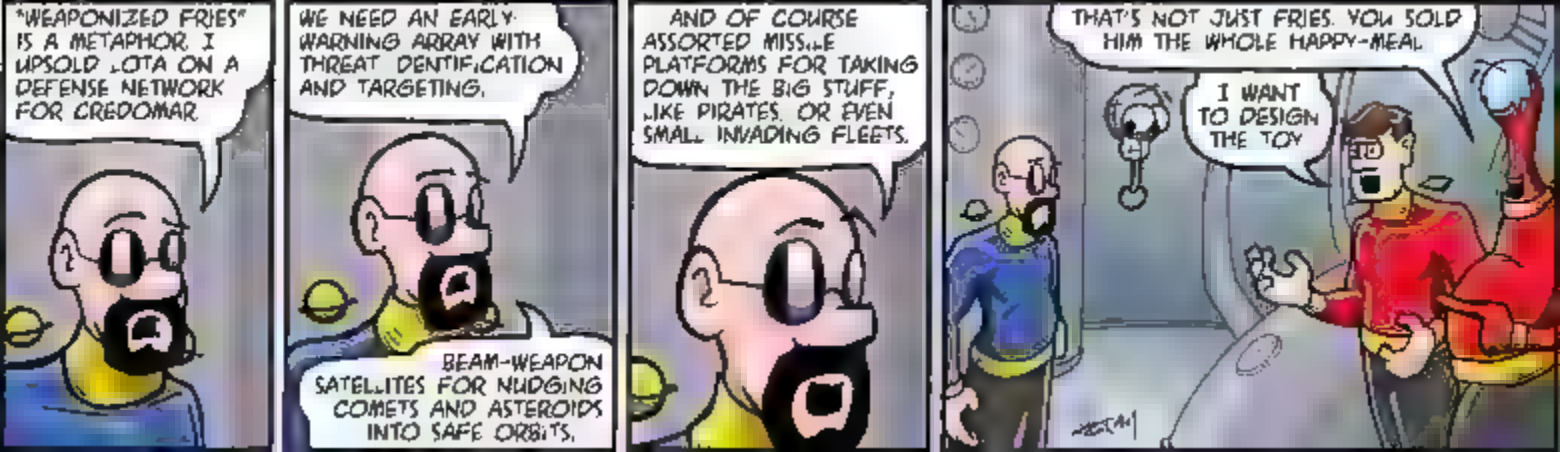

SO.. UMM. HOW DID YOU FIND OUT ABOUT OPERATION "BAKE ME A CHUPAQUESO?"
It is sensitive. Can you keep a secret, Commander Andrayesh?
OF COURSE I CAN
Really? Then how did Lato find out about Operation "Bake Me A Chupaqueso?"
I SUPPOSE I HAD THAT COMING.

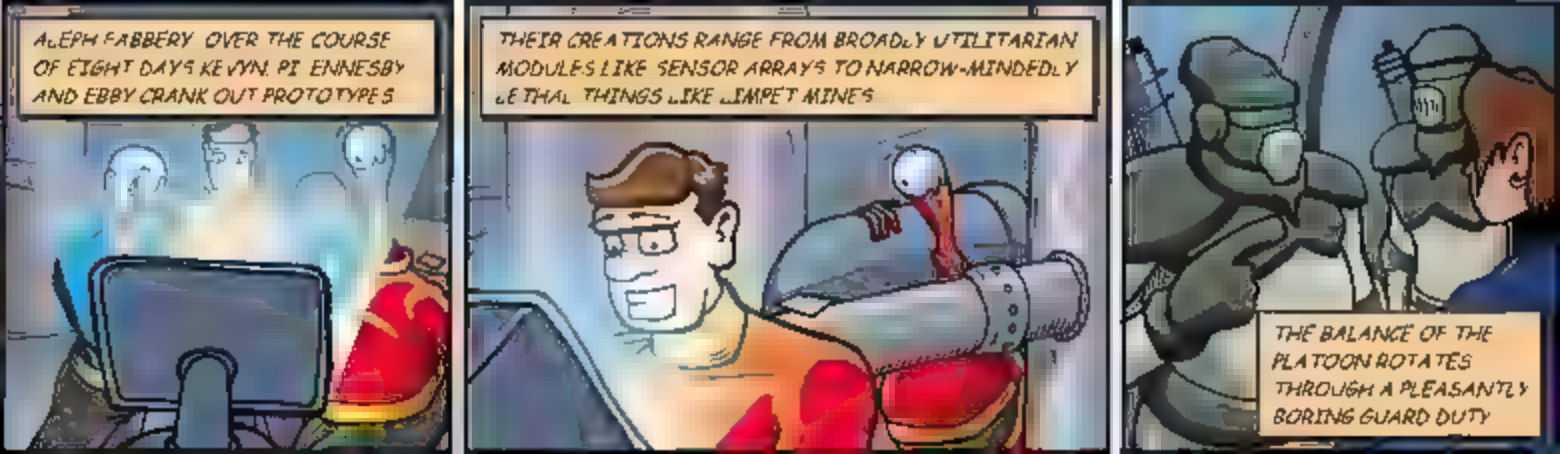

IF I HAD TO GUESS, I'D SAY YOU HAD OUR CABINS BUGGED
BUT I RANDOMLY SELECTED THE CABIN FOR THAT PARTICULAR CONVERSATION, WHICH SUGGESTS THAT YOU HAD THE ENTIRE TRANSPORT BUGGED
OF COURSE MOST PLANETARY GOVERNMENTS HAVE LAWS AGAINST THAT SORT OF THING.
Governments pass those laws in order to protect their existing monopolies on espionage
YOU'RE GETTING REALLY GOOD AT THIS "KING" THING, YOUR MAJESTY

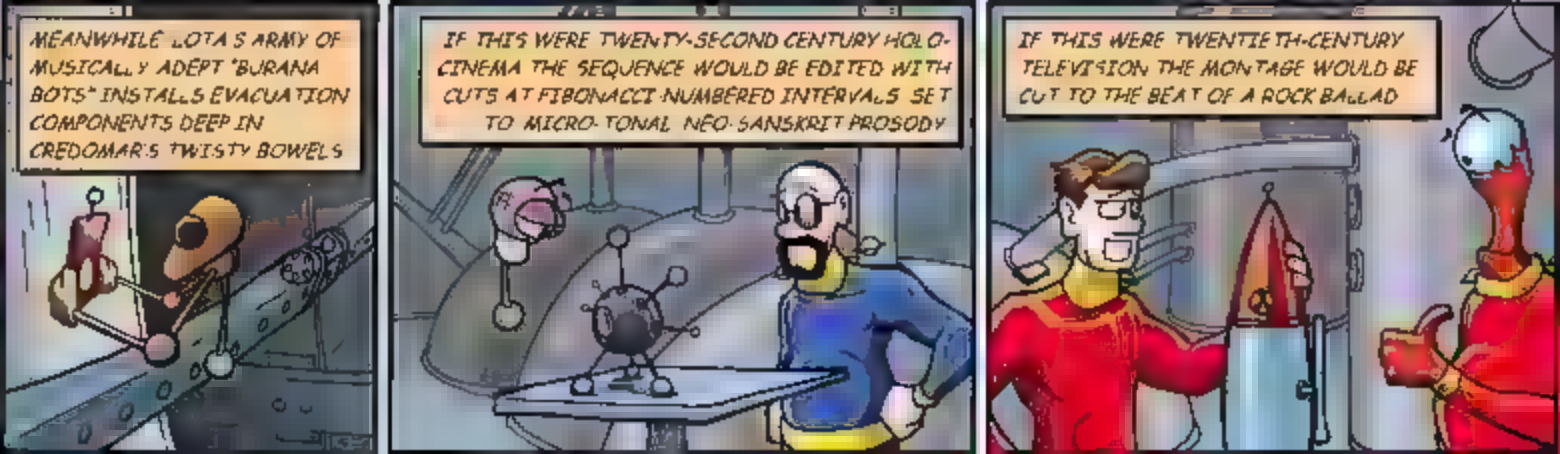

LOTA, I'M WORRIED FOR YOUR PEOPLE. THIS STATION STILL DOESN'T HAVE ANYTHING DEFENDING IT. PLEASE LET ME HELP.
You cannot be allowed access to the annie-plant control systems. Can you help in spite of that restriction?
THE FABBERS HERE CAN TURN OUT MILSPEC GEAR. MY TEAM AND I CAN PROVIDE PROTOTYPES FOR EVERYTHING FROM EARLY-WARNING ARRAYS TO INTERDICTMENT SATELLITES.
Excellent. With standard engineering rates of a two-point oh multiplier suffice for compensation?
HEY, WE ALWAYS LIKE GETTING PAID MORE THAN ONCE FOR THE SAME WORK.
It does make manipulating you more convenient.


ENNESBY ROUND UP EBBY AND PI FOR ME. WE'VE GOT WORK TO DO.
But we just got to the part of the project where we don't have to do any more work.
NO, WE JUST GOT TO THE PART OF THE PROJECT WHERE I SELL AN ADD-ON TO A HAPPY CUSTOMER.
How does that work? "Would you like Fries with your evacuation system?"
IF THEY'RE WEAPONIZED FRIES THEN YES, THAT'S EXACTLY HOW IT WORKS.

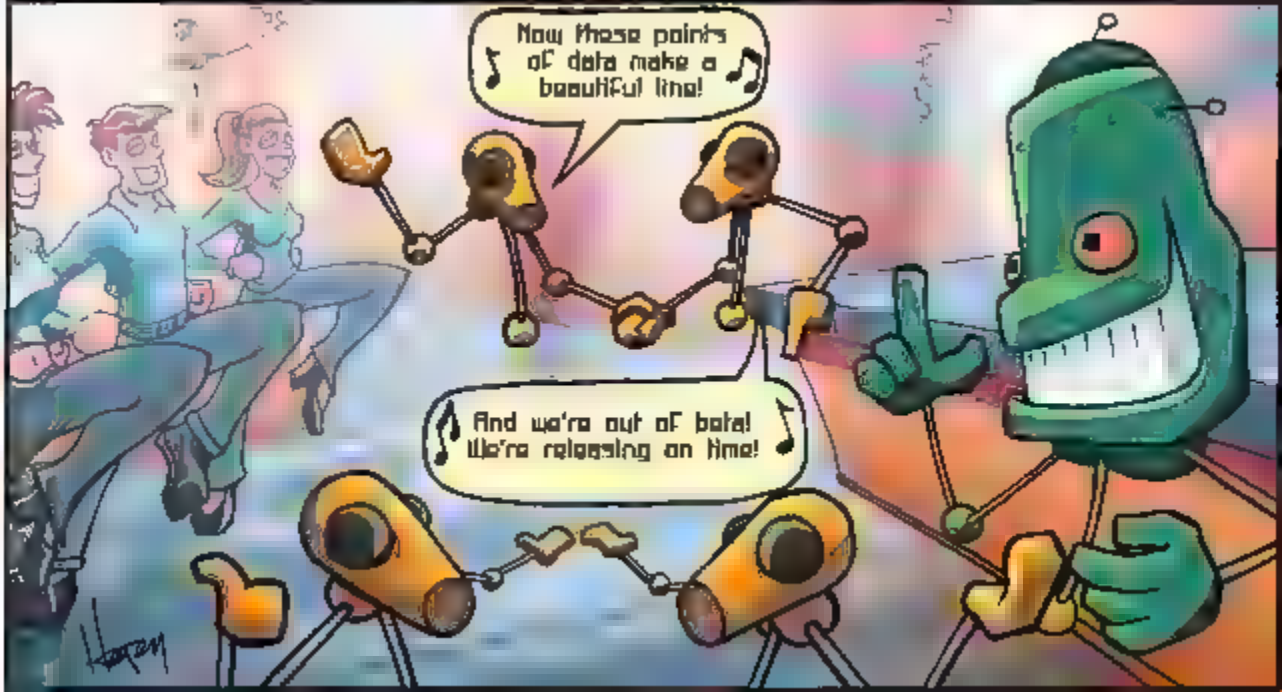

CREDOMAR'S EVACUATION SYSTEM WILL BE COMPLETE IN ABOUT TEN DAYS BETWEEN NOW AND THEN, OUR JOB IS TO DESIGN THE SYSTEMS THAT ENSURE IT NEVER NEEDS TO BE EVACUATED
WHAT KIND OF SYSTEMS, SIR?
Weaponized French Fries
ENNESBY, STOP CONFUSING HIM
DO THEY STILL NEED TO BE EDIBLE? THAT DROPS THE YIELD A LITTLE


"WEAPONIZED FRIES" IS A METAPHOR. I UPSOLD LOTA ON A DEFENSE NETWORK FOR CREDOMAR.
WE NEED AN EARLY-WARNING ARRAY WITH THREAT IDENTIFICATION AND TARGETING.
BEAM-WEAPON SATELLITES FOR NUDGING COMETS AND ASTEROIDS INTO SAFE ORBITS.
AND OF COURSE ASSORTED MISSILE PLATFORMS FOR TAKING DOWN THE BIG STUFF, LIKE PIRATES, OR EVEN SMALL INVADING FLEETS.
THAT'S NOT JUST FRIES. YOU SOLD HIM THE WHOLE HAPPY-MEAL.
I WANT TO DESIGN THE TOY


ALEPH FABBERY OVER THE COURSE OF EIGHT DAYS KEVYN PI ENNESBY AND EBBY CRANK OUT PROTOTYPES
THEIR CREATIONS RANGE FROM BROADLY UTILITARIAN MODULES LIKE SENSOR ARRAYS TO NARROW-MINDEDLY LETHAL THINGS LIKE LIMPET MINES
THE BALANCE OF THE PLATOON ROTATES THROUGH A PLEASANTLY BORING GUARD DUTY

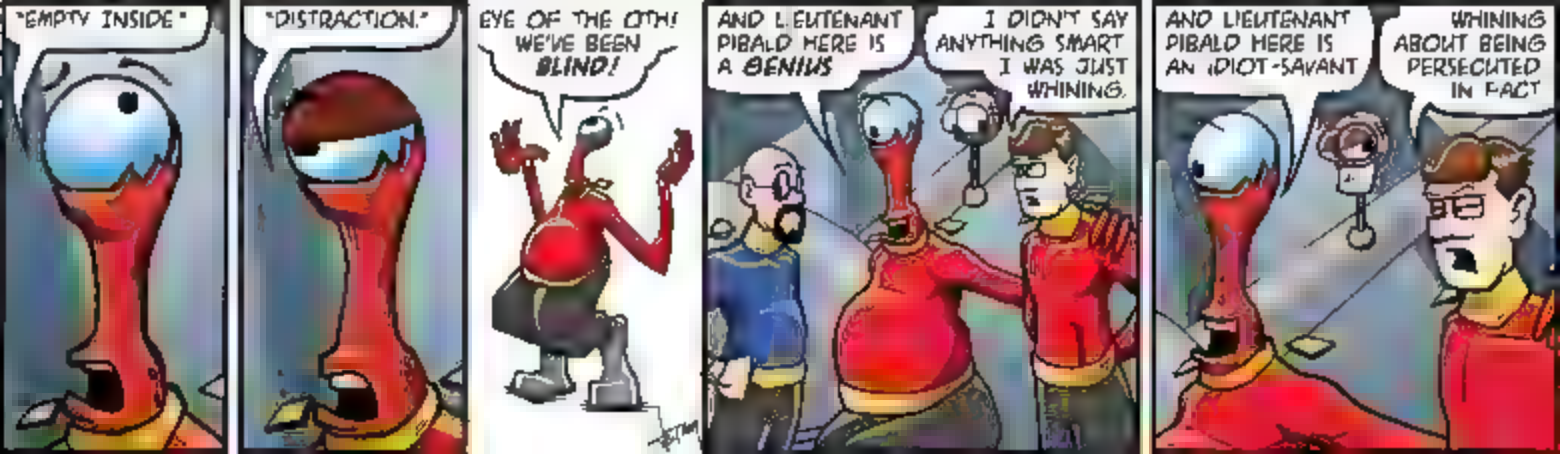

MEANWHILE LOTA'S ARMY OF MUSICALLY ADEPT "BURANA BOTS" INSTALLS EVACUATION COMPONENTS DEEP IN CREDOMAR'S TWISTY BOWELS
IF THIS WERE TWENTY-SECOND CENTURY HOLO-CINEMA THE SEQUENCE WOULD BE EDITED WITH CUTS AT FIBONACCI-NUMBERED INTERVALS SET TO MICRO-TONAL NEO-SANSKRIT PROSODY
IF THIS WERE TWENTIETH-CENTURY TELEVISION THE MONTAGE WOULD BE CUT TO THE BEAT OF A ROCK BALLAD

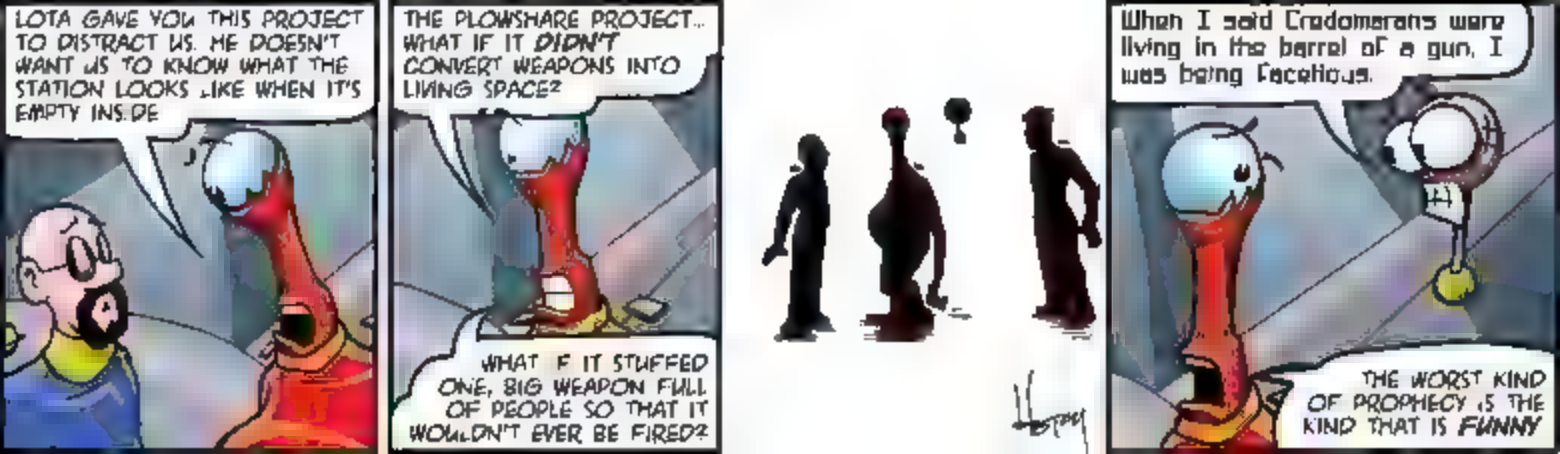
AND IF THIS WERE A BROADWAY MUSICAL MEMBERS OF THE CAST WOULD PERIODICALLY BURST INTO SONG ACCOMPANIED BY DANCING STRANGERS.

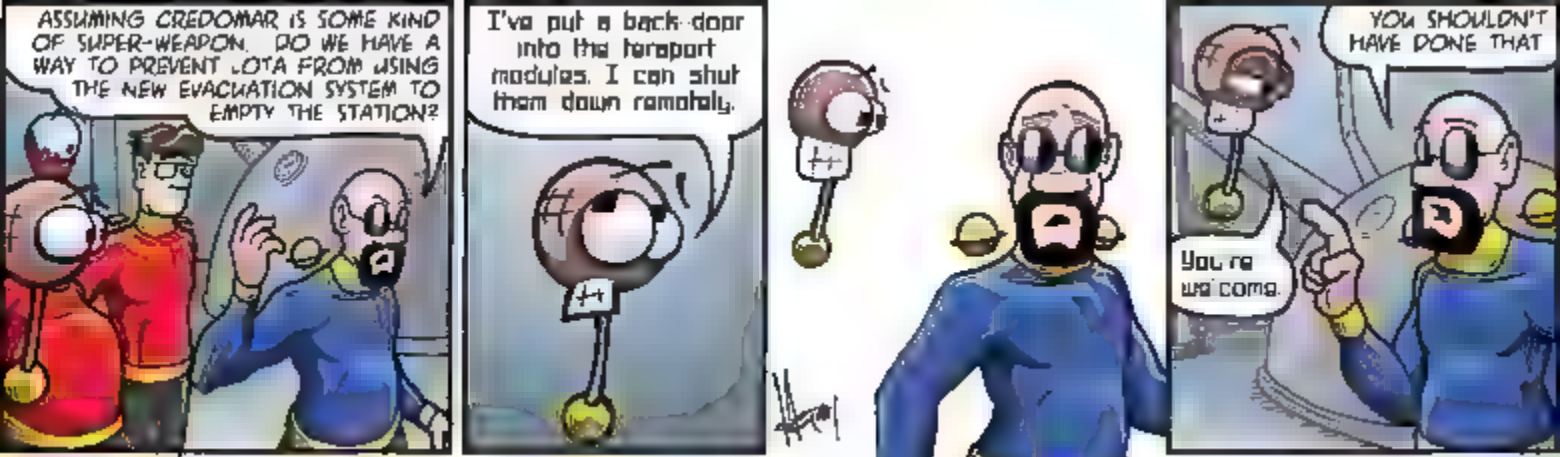


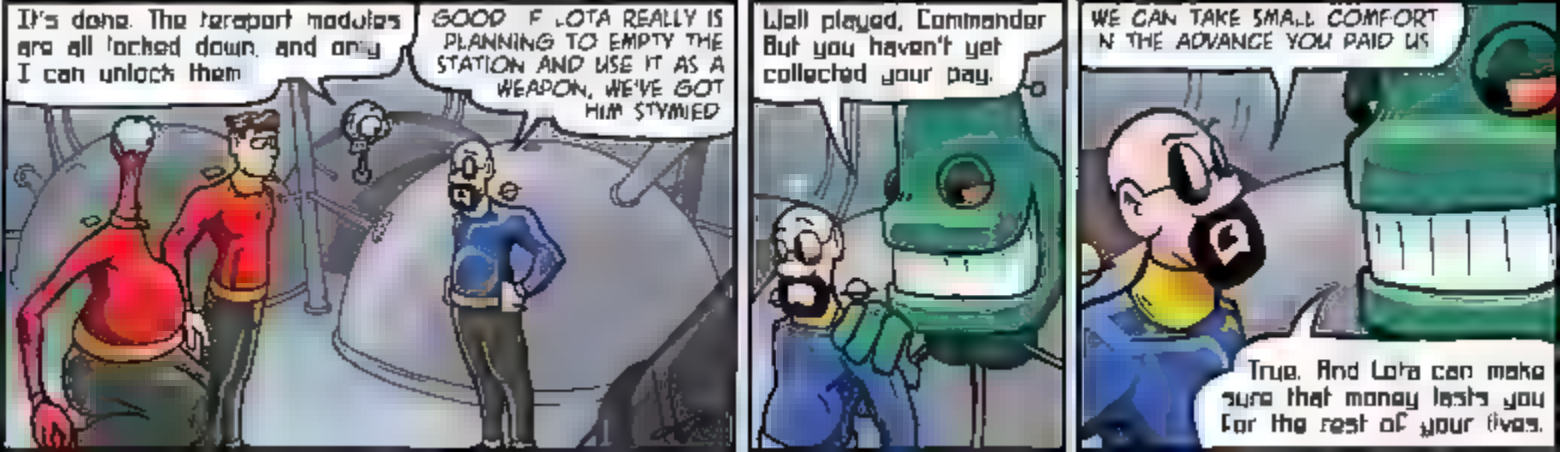

ARE WE READY TO PRESENT OUR PROTOTYPES TO THE KING?
OH, AM I EVER! WHERE ARE WE DOING THE DEMO?
I'M NOT SURE LOTA WANTS A DEMO. MOST OF THIS STUFF WOULD ONLY BE SAFE SEVERAL LIGHT MINUTES AWAY FROM THE STATION.
I'LL PACK A LUNCH

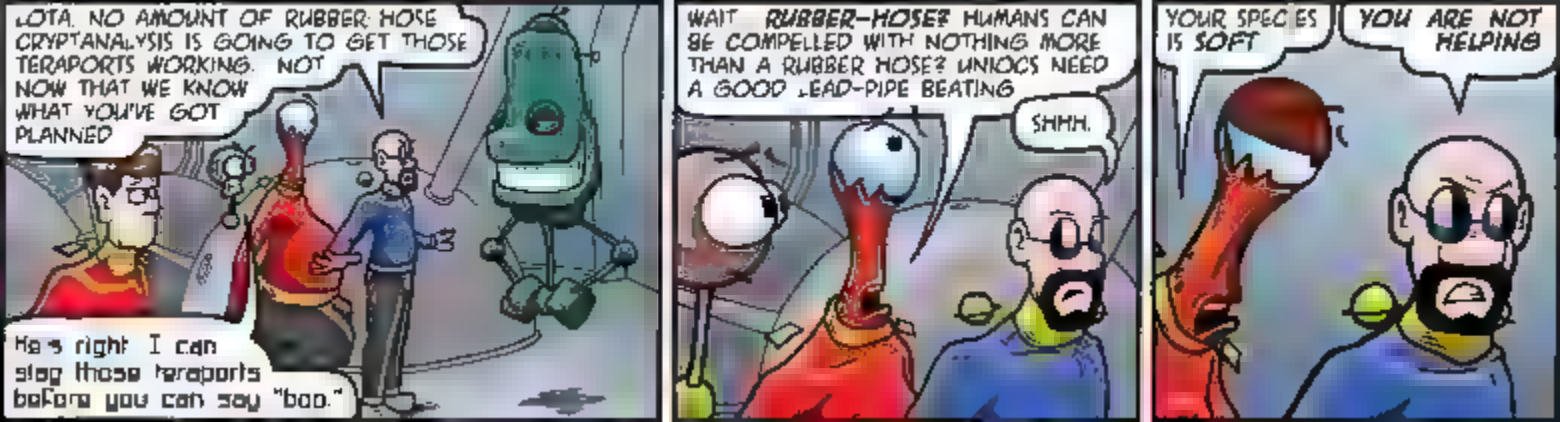

LIEUTENANT WE'RE HANDING OUR PROTOTYPES AND OUR NOTES TO LOTA, AND THEN COLLECTING OUR PAY THERE ARE NO PLANS FOR A DEMO
SO.. ALL THIS WEAPONRY, ALL THESE ENERGETIC YIELDS. THEY WERE JUST A LIE YOU WERE DISTRACTING ME TO KEEP ME OCCUPIED
THAT'S JUST A HAPPY SIDE EFFECT, LIEUTENANT
IF IT'S A HAPPY SIDE-EFFECT, WHY DO I FEEL SO EMPTY INSIDE?


"EMPTY INSIDE"
"DISTRACTION."
EYE OF THE OTH! WE'VE BEEN BLIND!
AND LIEUTENANT PIBALD HERE IS A GENIUS
I DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING SMART I WAS JUST WHINING.
AND LIEUTENANT PIBALD HERE IS AN IDIOT-SAVANT
WHINING ABOUT BEING PERSECUTED IN FACT

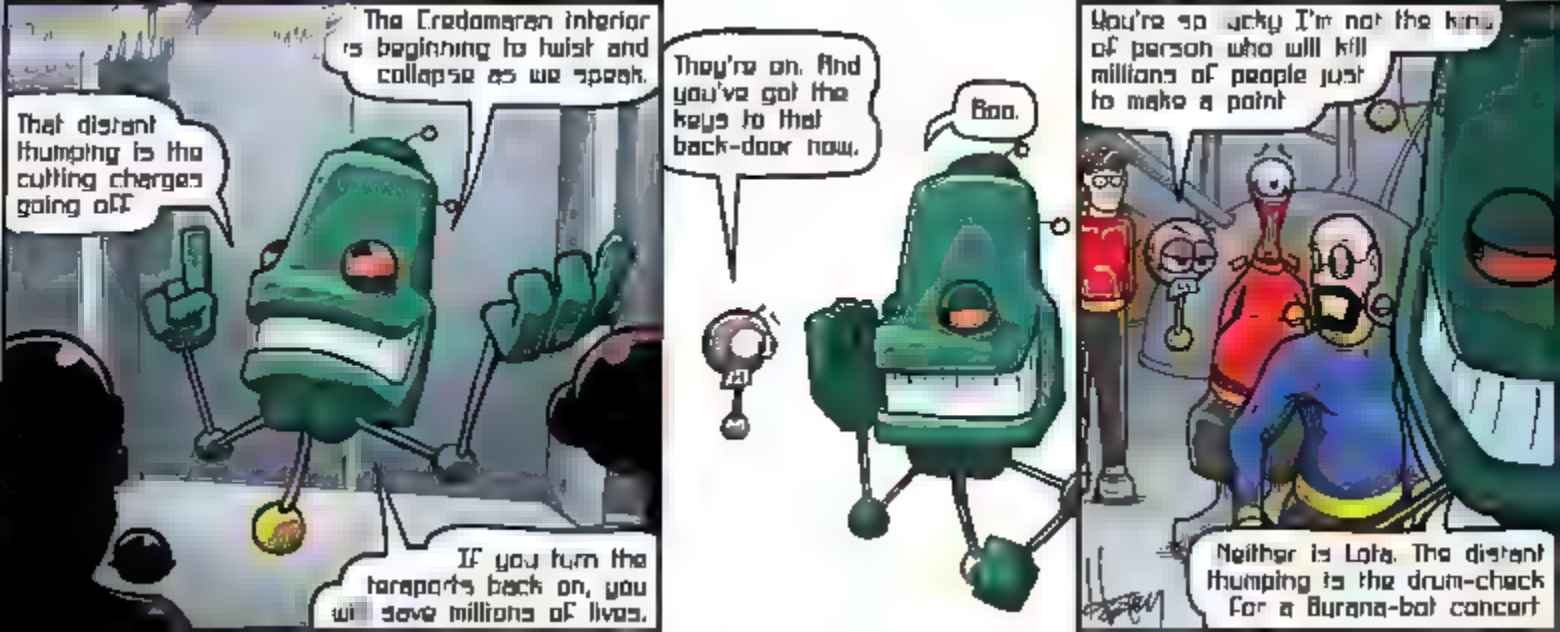

LOTA GAVE YOU THIS PROJECT TO DISTRACT US. HE DOESN'T WANT US TO KNOW WHAT THE STATION LOOKS LIKE WHEN IT'S EMPTY INSIDE
THE PLOWSHARE PROJECT... WHAT IF IT DIDN'T CONVERT WEAPONS INTO LIVING SPACE?
WHAT IF IT STUFFED ONE, BIG WEAPON FULL OF PEOPLE SO THAT IT WOULDN'T EVER BE FIRED?
When I said Credomorans were living in the barrel of a gun, I was being facetious.
THE WORST KIND OF PROPHECY IS THE KIND THAT IS FUNNY

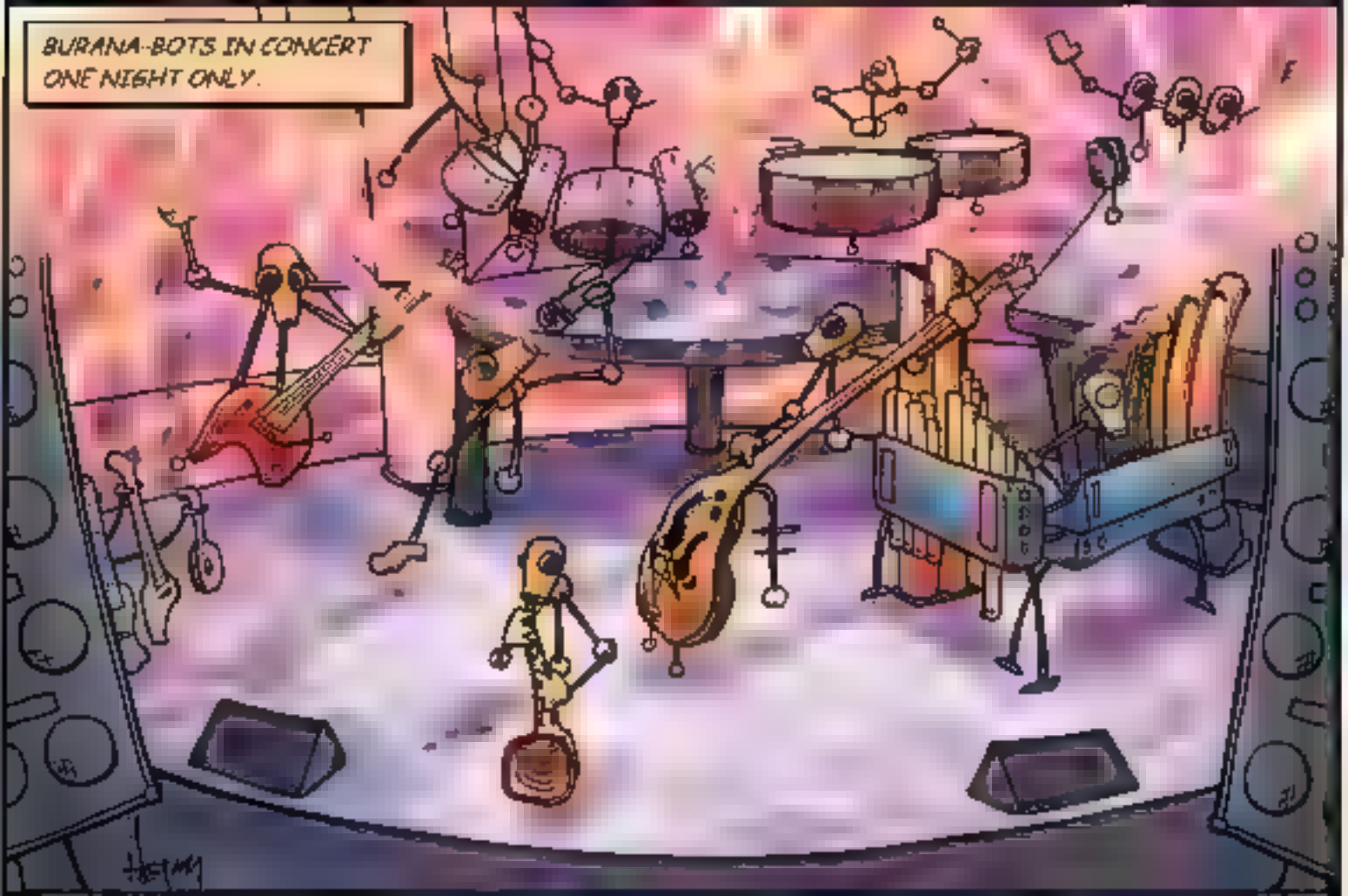

ASSUMING CREDOMAR IS SOME KIND OF SUPER-WEAPON. DO WE HAVE A WAY TO PREVENT LOTA FROM USING THE NEW EVACUATION SYSTEM TO EMPTY THE STATION?
I've put a back door into the teraport modules. I can shut them down remotely.
YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE DONE THAT
You're welcome.


It's done. The teraport modules are all locked down, and only I can unlock them
GOOD. F'LOTA REALLY IS PLANNING TO EMPTY THE STATION AND USE IT AS A WEAPON. WE'VE GOT HIM STYMIED
Well played, Commander But you haven't yet collected your pay.
WE CAN TAKE SMALL COMFORT IN THE ADVANCE YOU PAID US
True. And Lota can make sure that money lasts you for the rest of your lives.


LOTA. NO AMOUNT OF RUBBER HOSE CRYPTANALYSIS IS GOING TO GET THOSE TERAPORTS WORKING. NOT NOW THAT WE KNOW WHAT YOU'VE GOT PLANNED
He's right. I can slag those teraports before you can say "boo."
WAIT. RUBBER-HOSE? HUMANS CAN BE COMPELLED WITH NOTHING MORE THAN A RUBBER HOSE? UNIOCS NEED A GOOD LEAD-PIPE BEATING
SHHH.
YOUR SPECIES IS SOFT
YOU ARE NOT HELPING


We are at an impasse, then... unless Lola can convince you that these teraports will serve the best interests of Credomarans?
SURE. CONVINCE US.
Lola first requires a promise that the teraports can be quickly restored to full functionality.
ENNESBY?
It will only take about half a second to turn them all on again
Thank you.


That distant thumping is the cutting charges going off
The Credomaren interior is beginning to twist and collapse as we speak.
If you turn the teraports back on, you will save millions of lives.
They're on. And you've got the keys to that back-door now.
Boo.
You're so cocky I'm not the kind of person who will kill millions of people just to make a point
Neither is Lota. The distant thumping is the drum-check for a Burana-bot concert

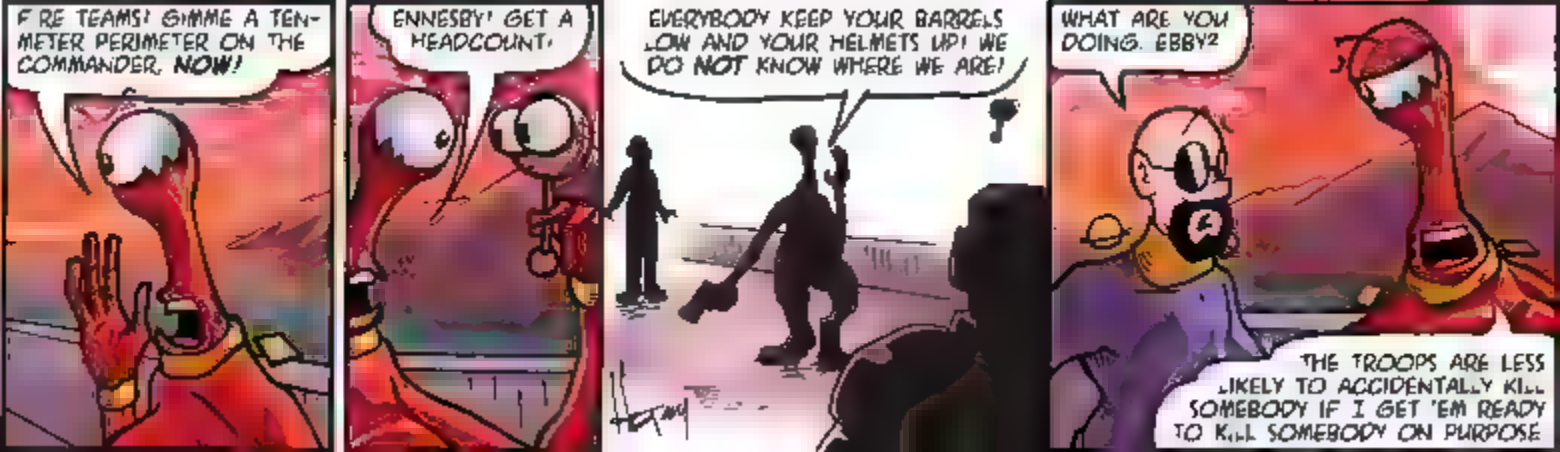


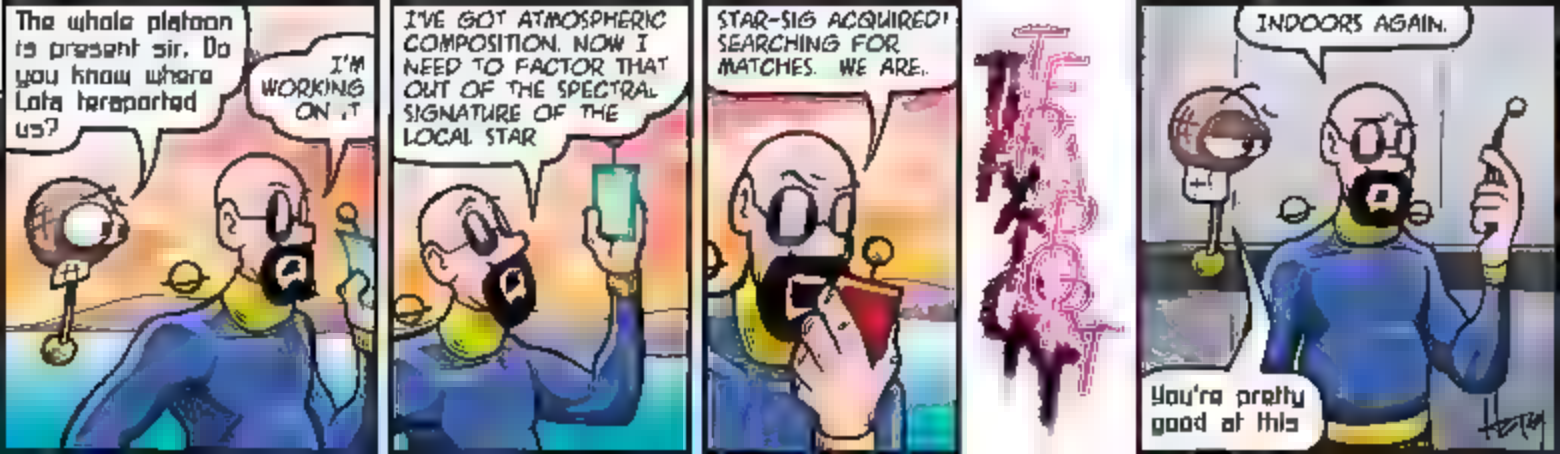
Rocking on completely with some brand-new components.



THE REVELINGS WILL CONTINUE IN IGNORANCE OF THE FACT THAT HALFWAY ACROSS THE GALAXY A GORILLA NAMED KERCHAK HAS JUST PUT ON HIS PANTS.

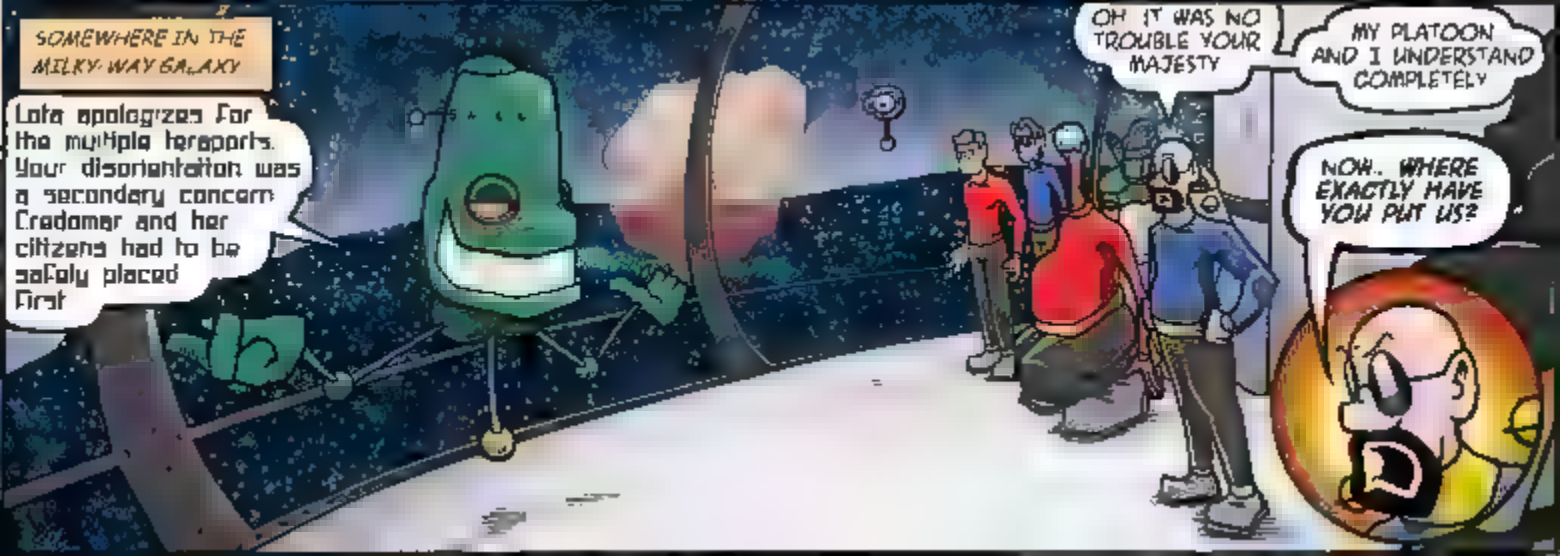

ONE ROBO-CONCERT LATER
I'M GOING TO BE HUMMING ORFF FOR A WEEK
It feels like the whole station is still vibrating to those final drumbeats.
I GUESS I WAS WRONG ABOUT LOTA. I FULLY EXPECTED HIM TO HAVE TERAPORTED EVERYBODY TO SOME PLANET BY
..NOW
AT LEAST HE PICKED ONE WITH PRETTY SUNRISES.

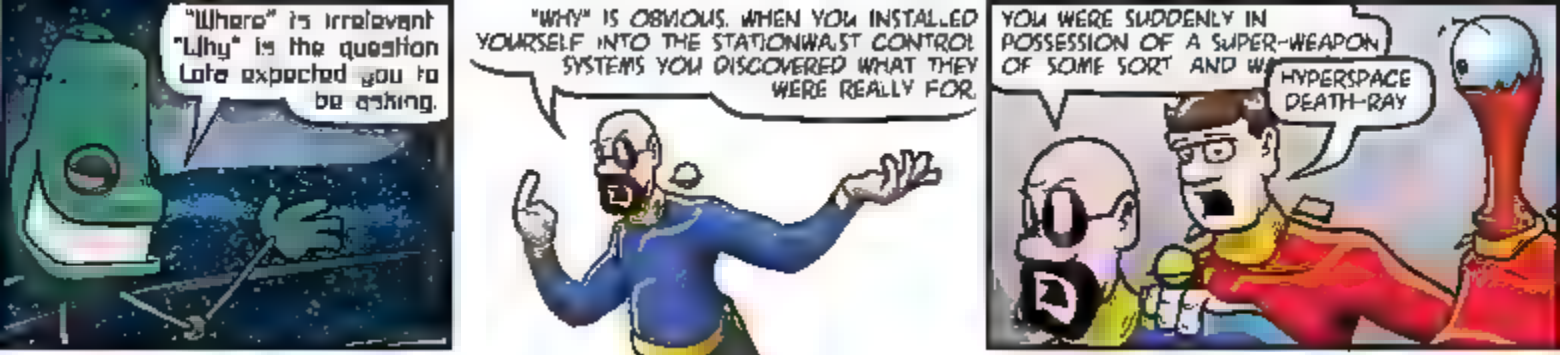

F RE TEAMS! GIMME A TEN-METER PERIMETER ON THE COMMANDER, NOW!
ENNESBY! GET A HEADCOUNT.
EVERYBODY KEEP YOUR BARRELS LOW AND YOUR HELMETS UP! WE DO NOT KNOW WHERE WE ARE!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING, EBBY?
THE TROOPS ARE LESS LIKELY TO ACCIDENTALLY KILL SOMEBODY IF I GET 'EM READY TO KILL SOMEBODY ON PURPOSE

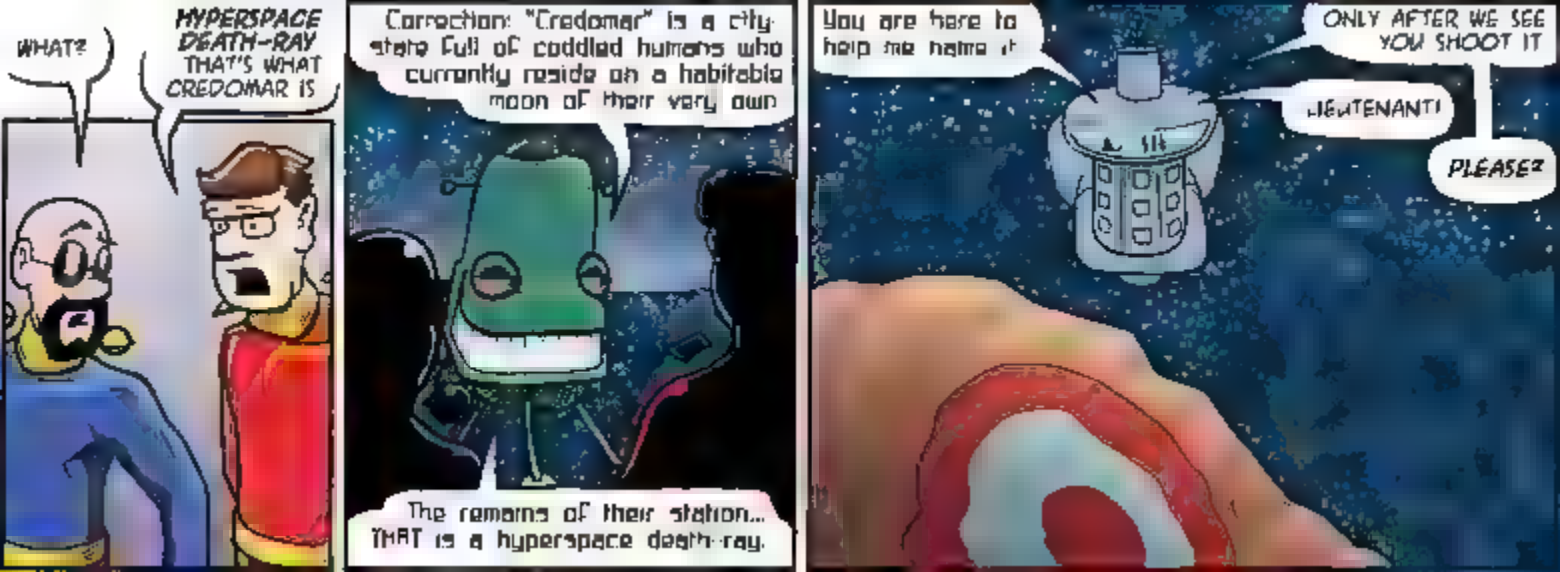

The whole platoon is present sir. Do you know where Lota teraported us?
I'M WORKING ON IT
I'VE GOT ATMOSPHERIC COMPOSITION. NOW I NEED TO FACTOR THAT OUT OF THE SPECTRAL SIGNATURE OF THE LOCAL STAR
STAR-SIG ACQUIRED! SEARCHING FOR MATCHES. WE ARE.
INDOORS AGAIN.
You're pretty good at this


SO LOTA EVICTED EVERYBODY AFTER ALL GREAT WE STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT CREDOMAR IS.
SURE WE DO
OBVIOUSLY IT'S A GIANT DEATH-RAY THAT FIRES THROUGH HYPERSPACE!
YOU EITHER NEED MORE MEDICATION, OR LESS SCIENCE-FICTION.
OR LESS MEDICATION AND MORE AMMO

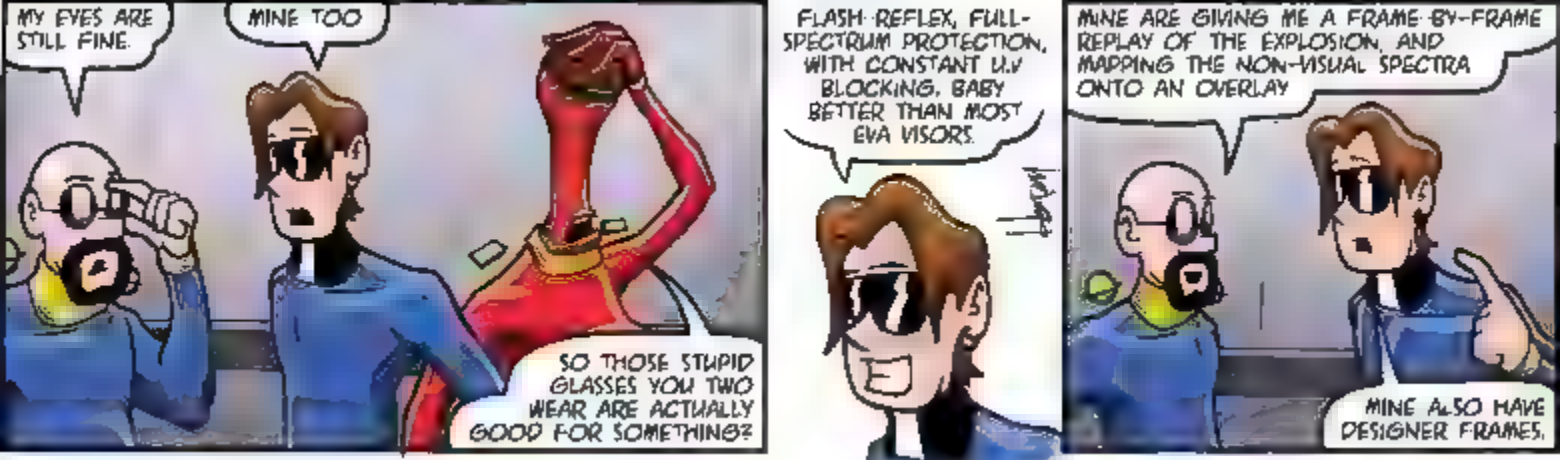

"HYPERSPACE DEATH-RAY" IS COMPLETELY LOGICAL.
CREDOMAR WAS BUILT BEFORE TERAPORTS, AND IS TOO BIG FOR WORMGATES.
THAT MEANS IT HAD TO BE FIRED WHERE IT WAS BUILT
NOW SINCE IT'S NOT SHARING THE SYSTEM WITH ANYTHING WORTH ATTACKING OR DEFENDING, IT WAS NEVER MEANT TO BE FIRED AT LOCAL TARGETS.
OKAY. I GUESS FIRING THROUGH HYPERSPACE MAKES SENSE, ASSUMING IT'S EVEN POSSIBLE.
BUT "DEATH-RAYZ"
IT SURE SN'T GONNA LAUNCH PRAYER BEADS.

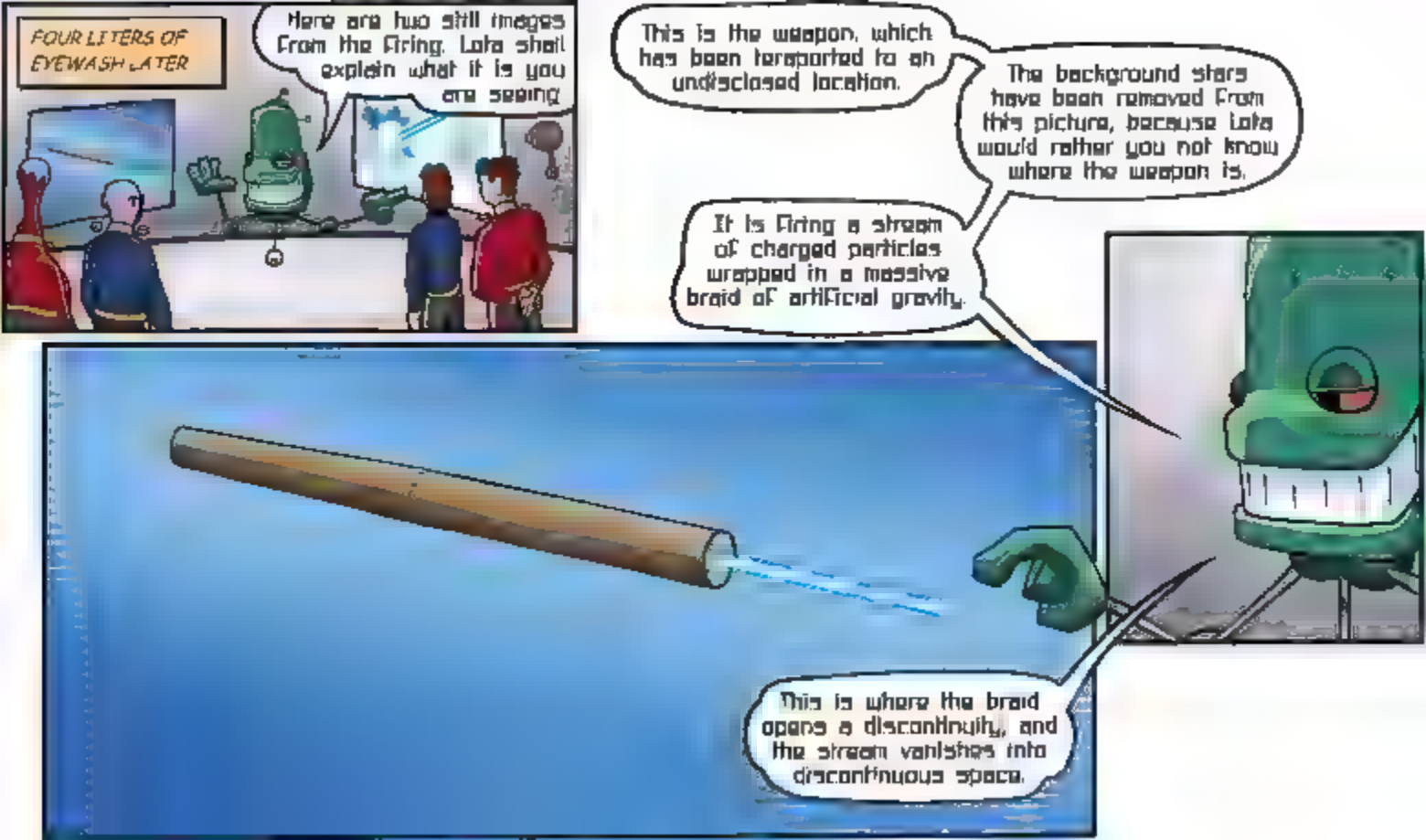

SOMEWHERE IN THE MILKY WAY GALAXY
Lota apologizes for the multiple teleports. Your disorientation was a secondary concern Credomar and her citizens had to be safely placed First
OH IT WAS NO TROUBLE YOUR MAJESTY
MY PLATOON AND I UNDERSTAND COMPLETELY
NOH.. WHERE EXACTLY HAVE YOU PUT US?

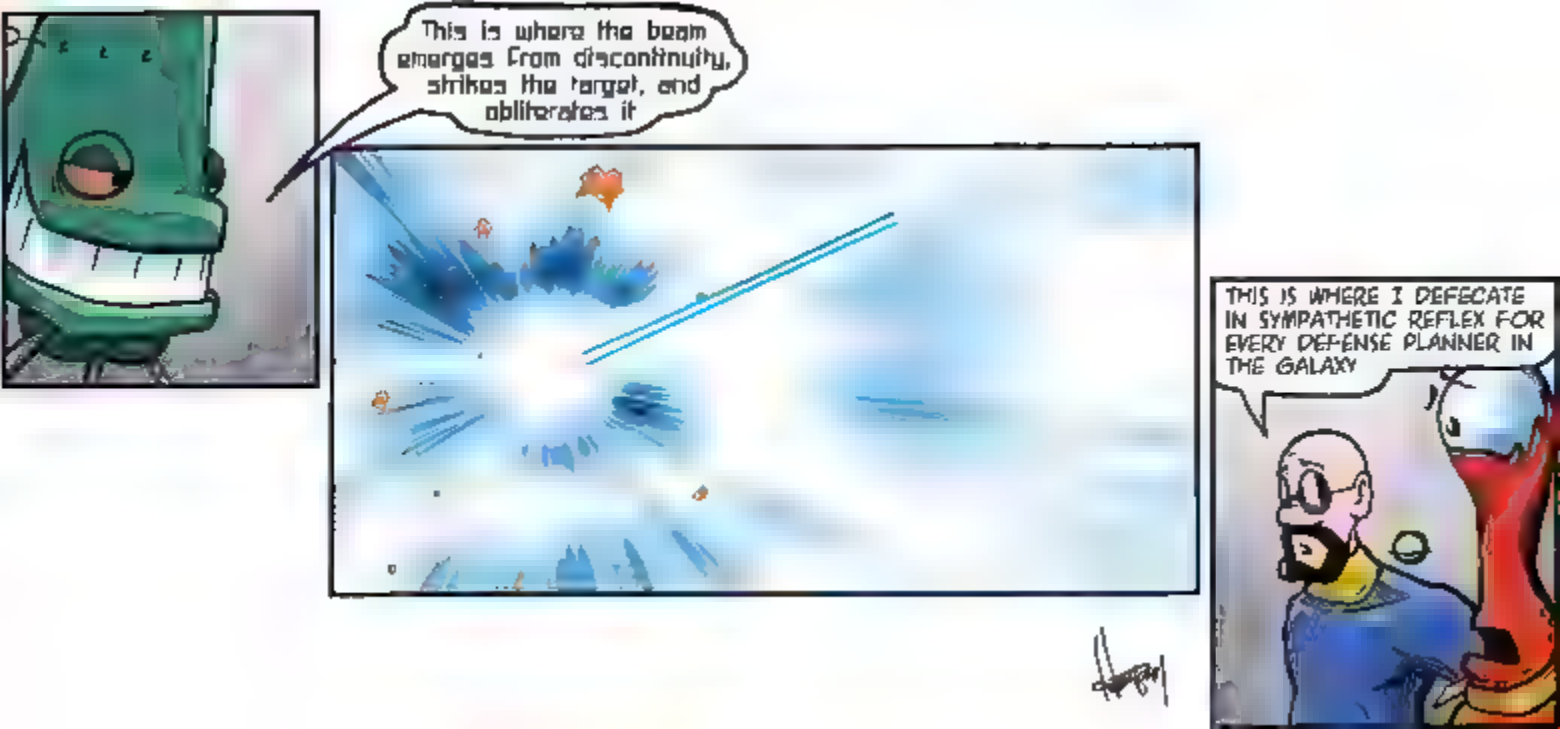

"Where" is irrelevant "Why" is the question Lafe expected you to be asking.
"WHY" IS OBVIOUS. WHEN YOU INSTALLED YOURSELF INTO THE STATIONWAST CONTROL SYSTEMS YOU DISCOVERED WHAT THEY WERE REALLY FOR.
YOU WERE SUDDENLY IN POSSESSION OF A SUPER-WEAPON OF SOME SORT AND W
HYPERSPACE DEATH-RAY

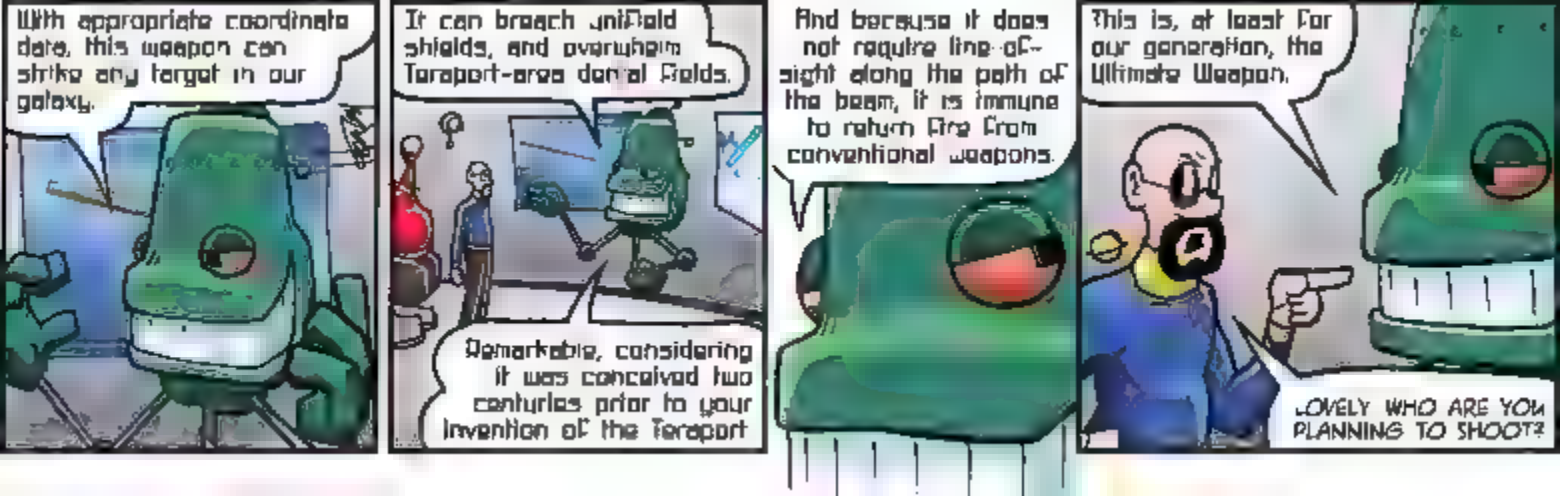

WHAT?
HYPERSPACE DEATH-RAY
THAT'S WHAT CREDOMAR IS
Correction: "Credomar" is a city-state full of coddled humans who currently reside on a habitable moon of their very own
The remains of their station... THAT is a hyperspace death-ray.
You are here to help me hate it
ONLY AFTER WE SEE YOU SHOOT IT
LIEUTENANT!
PLEASE?

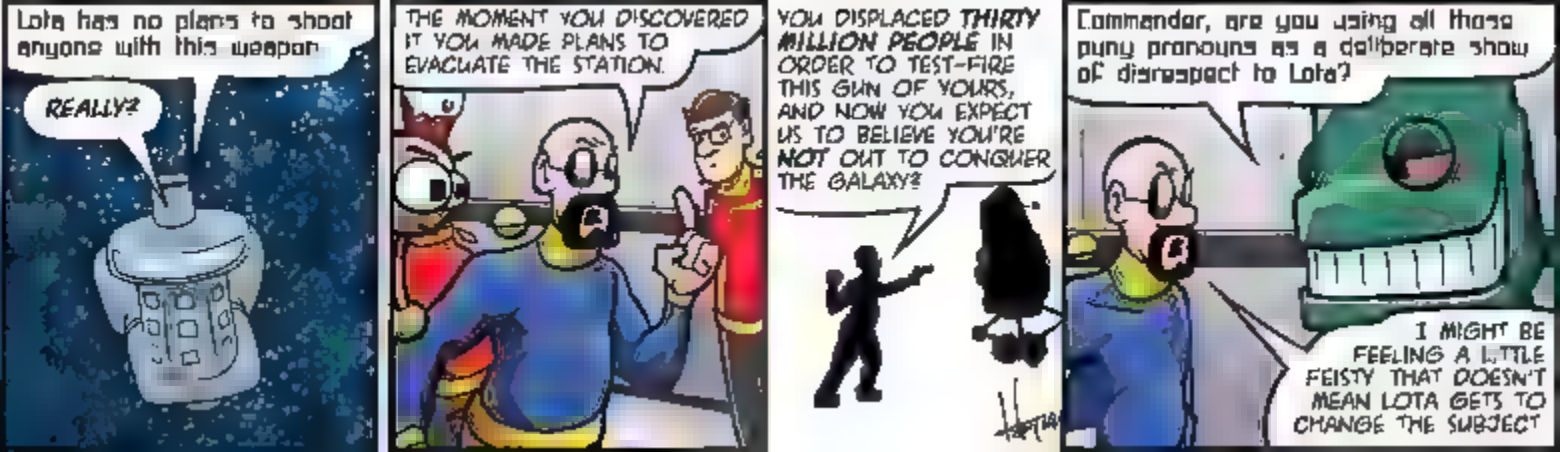

Yes, Loki brought you here to witness the test-firing. Do you all see the asteroid out there?
YES. WE SEE T
Now you don't
I THINK THAT'S BECAUSE I'M BLIND NOW
THIS AFTER-IMAGE IS SO LOUD I CAN TASTE IT

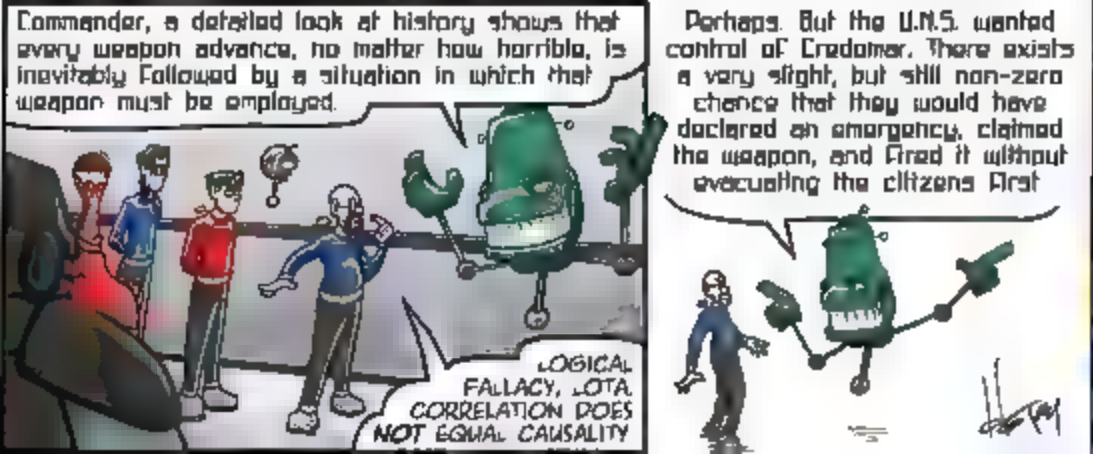

MY EYES ARE STILL FINE.
MINE TOO
SO THOSE STUPID GLASSES YOU TWO WEAR ARE ACTUALLY GOOD FOR SOMETHING?
FLASH REFLEX, FULL-SPECTRUM PROTECTION, WITH CONSTANT U.V BLOCKING. BABY BETTER THAN MOST EVA VISORS.
MINE ARE GIVING ME A FRAME-BY-FRAME REPLAY OF THE EXPLOSION, AND MAPPING THE NON-VISUAL SPECTRA ONTO AN OVERLAY
MINE ALSO HAVE DESIGNER FRAMES.

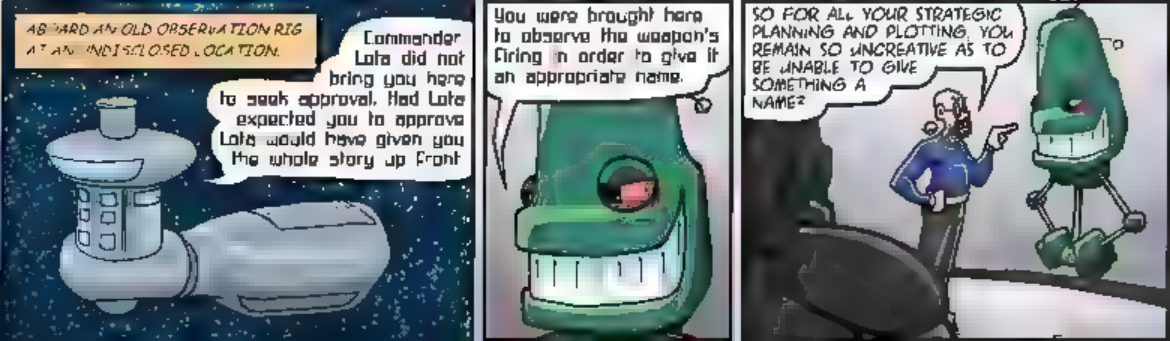

FOUR LITERS OF EYEWASH LATER
Here are two still images from the firing. Lola shall explain what it is you are seeing.
This is the weapon, which has been teleported to an undisclosed location.
The background stars have been removed from this picture, because Lola would rather you not know where the weapon is.
It is firing a stream of charged particles wrapped in a massive braid of artificial gravity.
This is where the braid opens a discontinuity, and the stream vanishes into discontinuous space.


This is where the beam emerges from discontinuity, strikes the target, and obliterates it
THIS IS WHERE I DEFECATE IN SYMPATHETIC REFLEX FOR EVERY DEFENSE PLANNER IN THE GALAXY

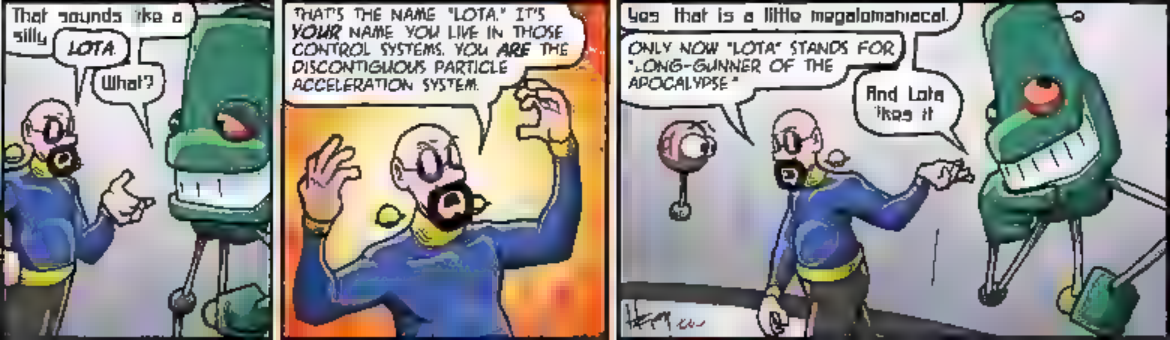

With appropriate coordinate data, this weapon can strike any target in our galaxy.
It can breach unified shields, and overwhelm Teraport-area dental fields.
Remarkable, considering it was conceived two centuries prior to your invention of the Teraport
And because it does not require line-of-sight along the path of the beam, it is immune to return fire from conventional weapons.
This is, at least for our generation, the Ultimate Weapon.
LOVELY WHO ARE YOU PLANNING TO SHOOT?

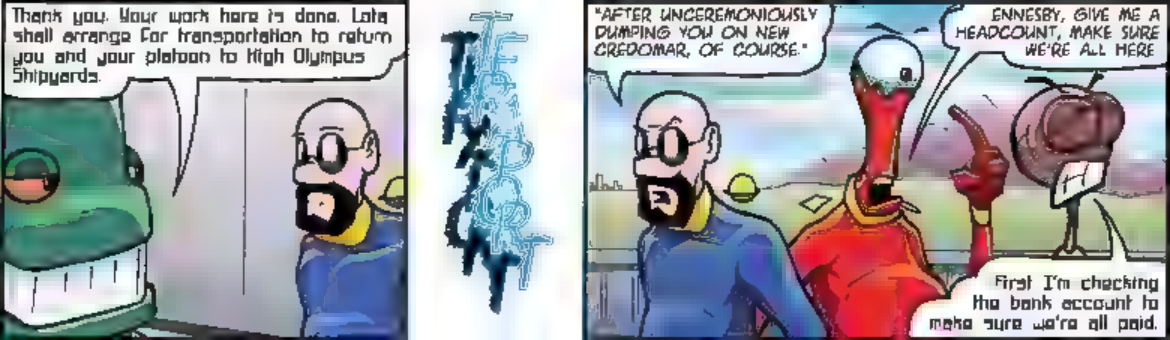

Lota has no plans to shoot anyone with this weapon
REALLY?
THE MOMENT YOU DISCOVERED IT YOU MADE PLANS TO EVACUATE THE STATION.
YOU DISPLACED THIRTY MILLION PEOPLE IN ORDER TO TEST-FIRE THIS GUN OF YOURS, AND NOW YOU EXPECT US TO BELIEVE YOU'RE NOT OUT TO CONQUER THE GALAXY?
Commander, are you using all those puny pronouns as a deliberate show of disrespect to Lota?
I MIGHT BE FEELING A LITTLE FEISTY THAT DOESN'T MEAN LOTA GETS TO CHANGE THE SUBJECT

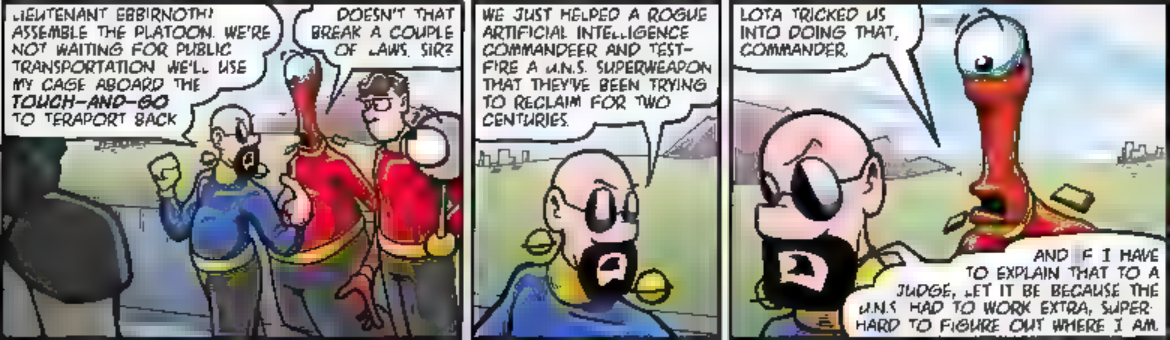

Commander, a detailed look at history shows that every weapon advance, no matter how horrible, is inevitably followed by a situation in which that weapon must be employed.
LOGICAL FALLACY, LOTA. CORRELATION DOES NOT EQUAL CAUSALITY
Perhaps. But the U.N.S. wanted control of Credomar. There exists a very slight, but still non-zero chance that they would have declared an emergency, claimed the weapon, and fired it without evacuating the citizens first
THAT DOES NOT MAKE ANY OF THIS OKAY
Lota chose the lesser of two evils. It is in Lota's job description as Monarch.


ABOARD AN OLD OBSERVATION RIG AT AN UNDISCLOSED LOCATION.
Commander Lota did not bring you here to seek approval. Had Lota expected you to approve Lota would have given you the whole story up front
You were brought here to observe the weapon's firing in order to give it an appropriate name.
SO FOR ALL YOUR STRATEGIC PLANNING AND PLOTTING, YOU REMAIN SO UNCREATIVE AS TO BE UNABLE TO GIVE SOMETHING A NAME?

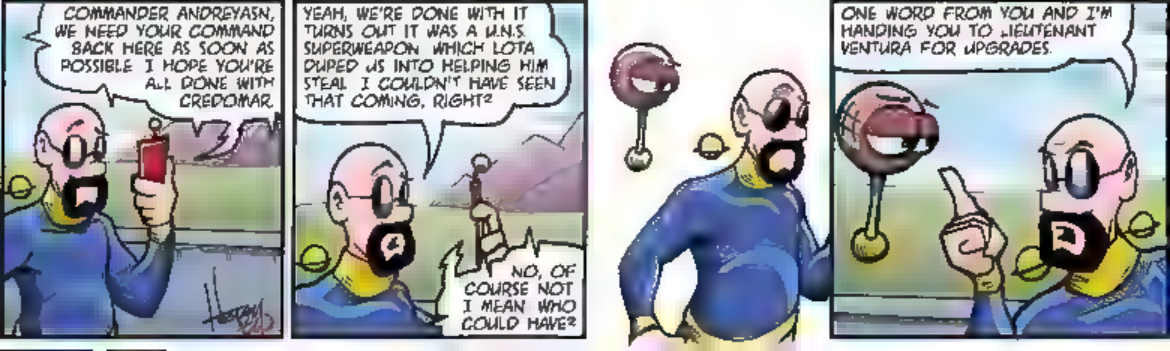

Names are difficult. "Apocalypse Cannon," for instance, has been used dozens of times just to describe toys. The original technical descriptor for the weapon, "Disconfiguous Particle Acceleration System," is unwieldy and not nearly threatening enough.
MAYBE IT'S A GOOD THING THAT THE PERFECT NAME.. THE OBVIOUS NAME. IS ONE THAT YOU HAVEN'T COME UP WITH.
MEGALOMANIACAL. AT BEST
What is it?


That sounds like a silly
LOTA
What?
THAT'S THE NAME "LOTA." IT'S YOUR NAME YOU LIVE IN THOSE CONTROL SYSTEMS. YOU ARE THE DISCONTIGUOUS PARTICLE ACCELERATION SYSTEM.
Yes that is a little megalomaniacal.
ONLY NOW "LOTA" STANDS FOR "LONG-GUNNER OF THE APOCALYPSE."
And Lota likes it

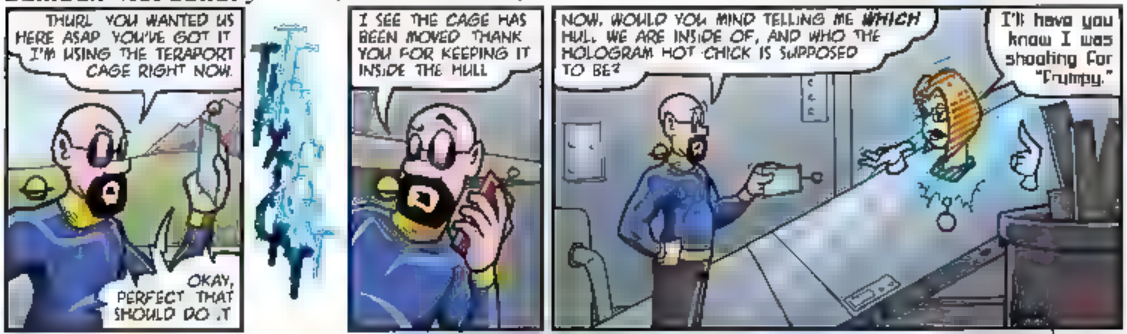

Thank you. Your work here is done. Lata shall arrange for transportation to return you and your platoon to High Olympus Shipyards.
"AFTER UNCEREMONIOUSLY DUMPING YOU ON NEW CREDOMAR, OF COURSE."
ENNESBY, GIVE ME A HEADCOUNT, MAKE SURE WE'RE ALL HERE
First I'm checking the bank account to make sure we're all paid.


LIEUTENANT EBBIRNOTH! ASSEMBLE THE PLATOON. WE'RE NOT WAITING FOR PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION WE'LL USE MY CASE ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO TO TERAPORT BACK
DOESN'T THAT BREAK A COUPLE OF LAWS, SIR?
WE JUST HELPED A ROGUE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE COMMANDEER AND TEST-FIRE A U.N.S. SUPERWEAPON THAT THEY'VE BEEN TRYING TO RECLAIM FOR TWO CENTURIES.
LOTA TRICKED US INTO DOING THAT, COMMANDER.
AND IF I HAVE TO EXPLAIN THAT TO A JUDGE, LET IT BE BECAUSE THE U.N.S HAD TO WORK EXTRA, SUPER HARD TO FIGURE OUT WHERE I AM.


Commander, do you remember when you said that maybe Lola wanted us to build him a superweapon so he could cruise the galaxy as a giant robot ninja-pirate terrorist?
And remember how you said it sarcastically, to shut me up when I was worrying about Lola's plans?
IF YOU SAY "I TOLD YOU SO," I GET TO SAY "MY SARCASM IS MORE ACCURATE THAN YOUR PARANOIA."
That's Fair

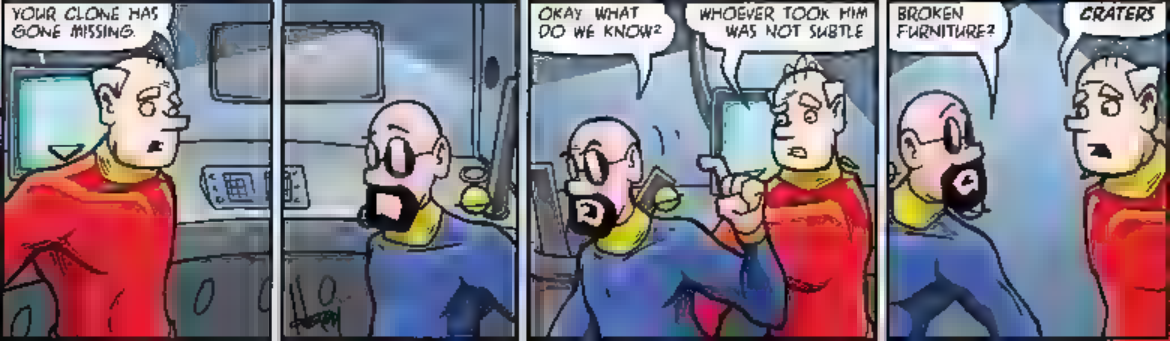

COMMANDER ANDREYASN, WE NEED YOUR COMMAND BACK HERE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE I HOPE YOU'RE ALL DONE WITH CREDOMAR.
YEAH, WE'RE DONE WITH IT TURNS OUT IT WAS A U.N.S. SUPERWEAPON WHICH LOTA DUPED US INTO HELPING HIM STEAL I COULDN'T HAVE SEEN THAT COMING, RIGHT?
NO, OF COURSE NOT I MEAN WHO COULD HAVE?
ONE WORD FROM YOU AND I'M HANDING YOU TO LIEUTENANT VENTURA FOR UPGRADES.

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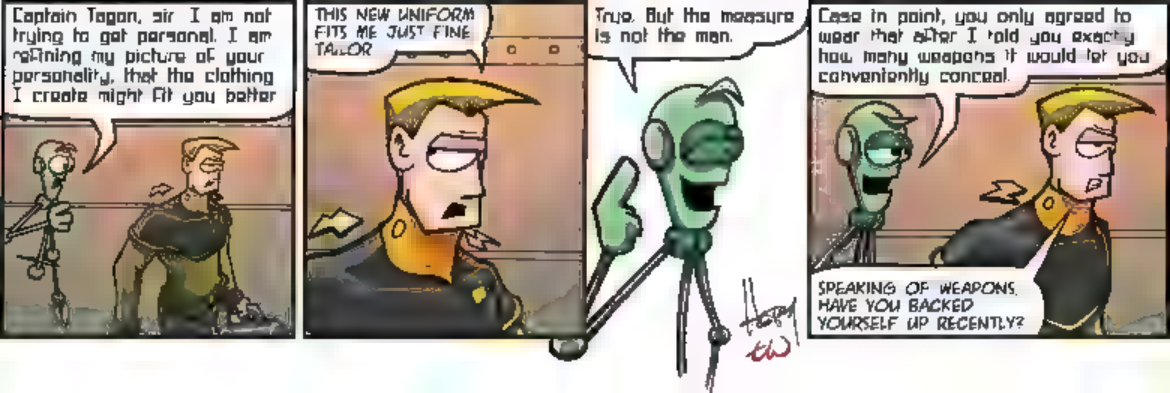

THURL YOU WANTED US HERE ASAP. YOU'VE GOT IT I'M USING THE TERAPORT CAGE RIGHT NOW.
OKAY, PERFECT. THAT SHOULD DO IT.
I SEE THE CAGE HAS BEEN MOVED. THANK YOU FOR KEEPING IT INSIDE THE HULL.
NOW, WOULD YOU MIND TELLING ME WHICH HULL WE ARE INSIDE OF, AND WHO THE HOLOGRAM HOT CHICK IS SUPPOSED TO BE?
I'll have you know I was shooting for "Frumpy."

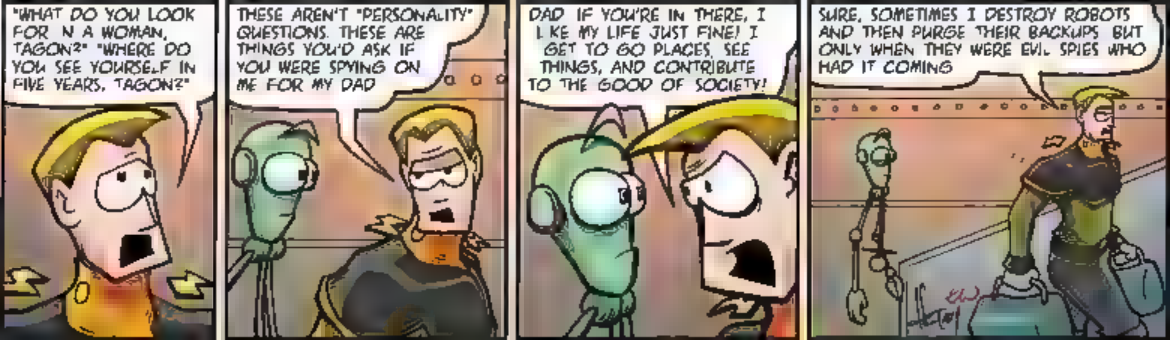

I am Tagiaalisi, or Tagii if you're in a hurry.
Though it would not be accurate to say "I used to be Tag," I do have access to this ship's former A.I.'s gestalt
A FEMALE PERSONA? CAPTAIN TAGON IS GOING TO HATE YOU. YOUR STATE WILL FORCE HIM TO PRE-THINK ALL OF HIS INTERACTIONS WITH THE
YOU KNOW TAGON DOING MORE THINKING WILL BE BETTER FOR ALL OF US. YOU'RE BRILLIANT, TAGII.
Thank you, sir
HEY! THAT'S MY COMPLIMENT YOU'RE BASKING IN, LADY

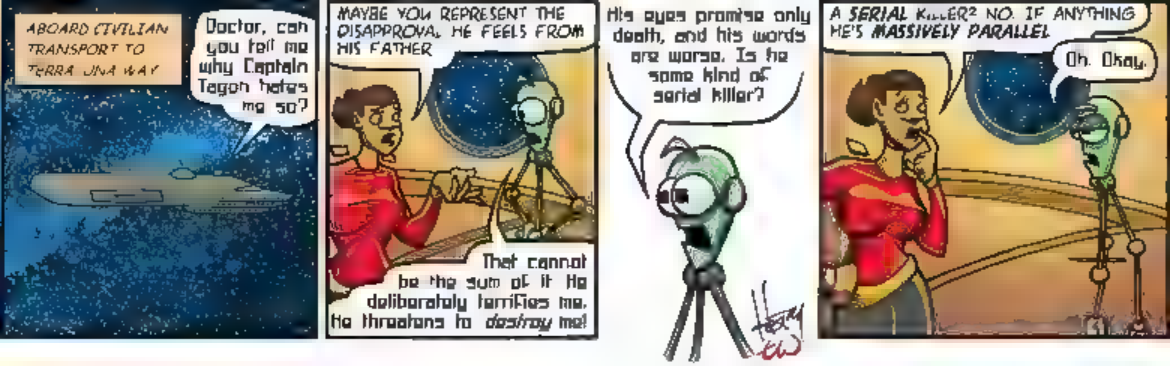

ABOARD THE REFITTED REASSEMBLED MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH AND GO.
IS THAT EXPOSED HIGH-VOLTAGE CONDUIT DRAPED ACROSS THE FLOOR?
CHROME ON A CRUTCH! THWRL! WHAT IS THIS MESS?
SORRY COMMANDER LONG STORY SHORT SHE'S NOT COMBAT READY, BUT SHE WILL STAY IN ONE PIECE NOW.
I GUESS THAT'S A START WHAT'S THE HURRY? WHY THE PANIC CALL?

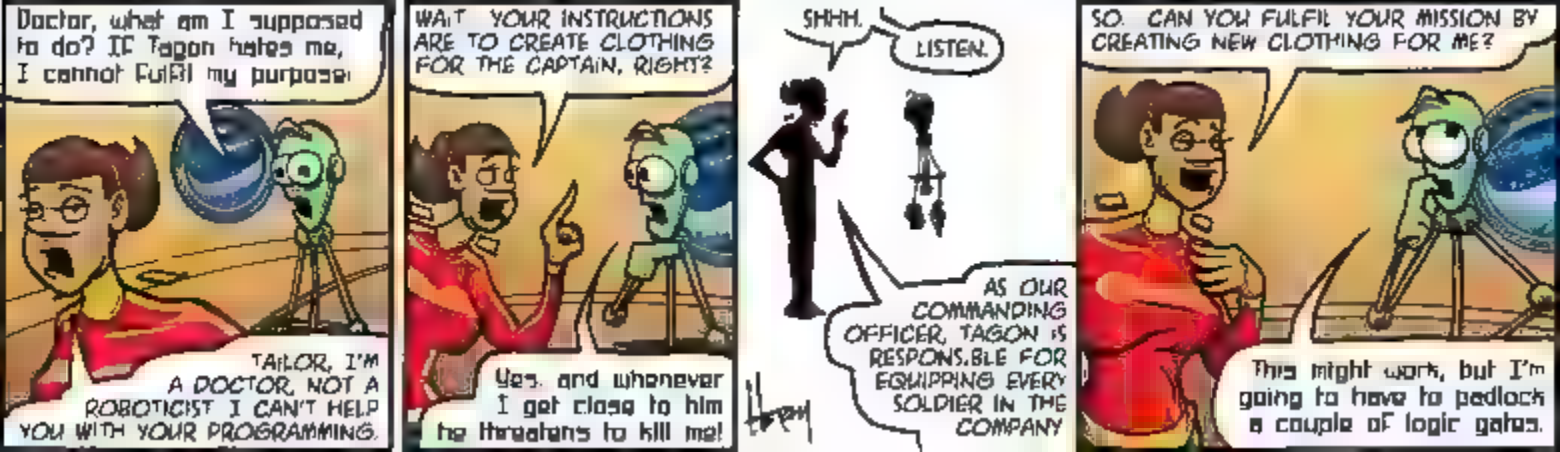

YOUR CLONE HAS GONE MISSING.
OKAY. WHAT DO WE KNOW?
WHOEVER TOOK HIM WAS NOT SUBTLE
BROKEN FURNITURE?
CRATERS

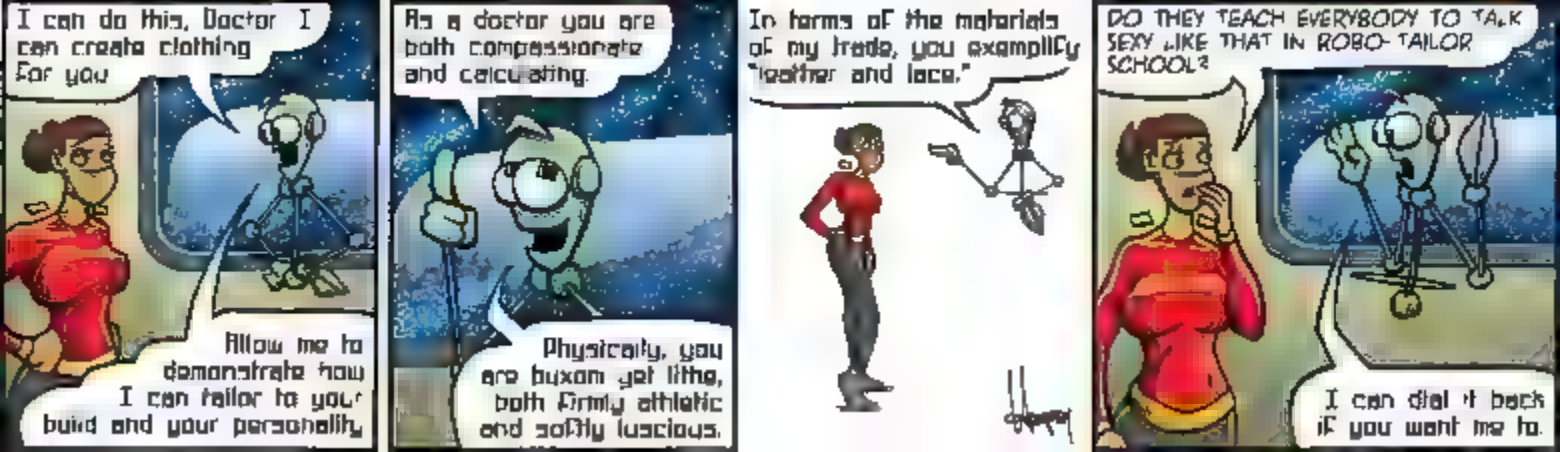

THAT'S NOT THE WORST OF IT, COMMANDER. WHOEVER TOOK YOUR CLONE ALSO TOOK CAPTAIN TAGON'S FATHER.
GENERAL KARL TAGON HE SENT THE CAPTAIN THAT TAILOR-BOT, RIGHT? ARE THEY CLOSE?
HOW SHOULD I KNOW? THE CAPTAIN NEVER TALKS ABOUT HIS FATHER.
BUT I NEED TO MAKE THE CALL AND GET HIM BACK HERE.
THIS COULD GET UGLY AND, PERSONAL.
REWIND: 699 HOURS EARLIER. DEPARTING HIGH-OLYMPUS.
Sir, I just wanted to get to know you bo!
CORK T. TAILOR IF YOU GET PERSONAL, I'M GOING TO GET UGLY

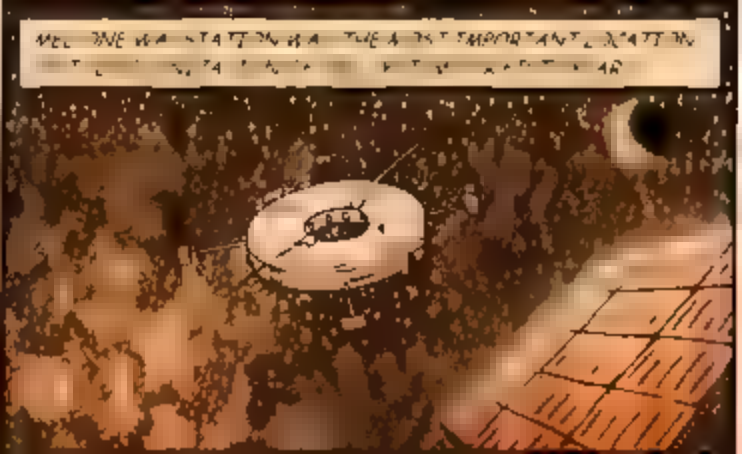

Captain Tagon, sir. I am not trying to get personal. I am refining my picture of your personality, that the clothing I create might fit you better
THIS NEW UNIFORM FITS ME JUST FINE TAILOR
True. But the measure is not the man.
Case in point, you only agreed to wear that after I told you exactly how many weapons it would let you conveniently conceal.
SPEAKING OF WEAPONS, HAVE YOU BACKED YOURSELF UP RECENTLY?


"WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR IN A WOMAN, TAGON?" "WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN FIVE YEARS, TAGON?"
THESE AREN'T "PERSONALITY" QUESTIONS. THESE ARE THINGS YOU'D ASK IF YOU WERE SPYING ON ME FOR MY DAD
DAD, IF YOU'RE IN THERE, I LIKE MY LIFE JUST FINE! I GET TO GO PLACES, SEE THINGS, AND CONTRIBUTE TO THE GOOD OF SOCIETY!
SURE, SOMETIMES I DESTROY ROBOTS AND THEN PURGE THEIR BACKUPS BUT ONLY WHEN THEY WERE EVIL SPIES WHO HAD IT COMING

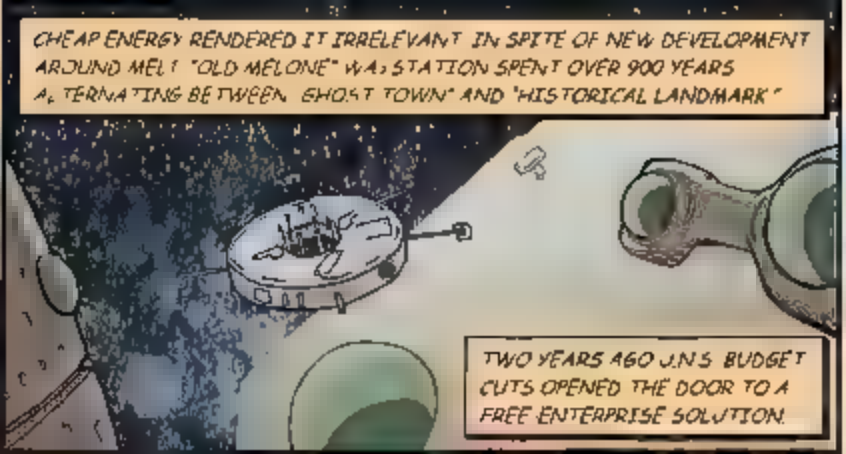

ABOARD CIVILIAN TRANSPORT TO TERRA JINA WAY
Doctor, can you tell me why Captain Tegon hates me so?
MAYBE YOU REPRESENT THE DISAPPROVAL HE FEELS FROM HIS FATHER
That cannot be the sum of it. He deliberately terrifies me. He threatens to *destroy* me!
His eyes promise only death, and his words are worse. Is he some kind of serial killer?
A *SERIAL* KILLER? NO. IF ANYTHING HE'S *MASSIVELY PARALLEL*
Oh. Okay.

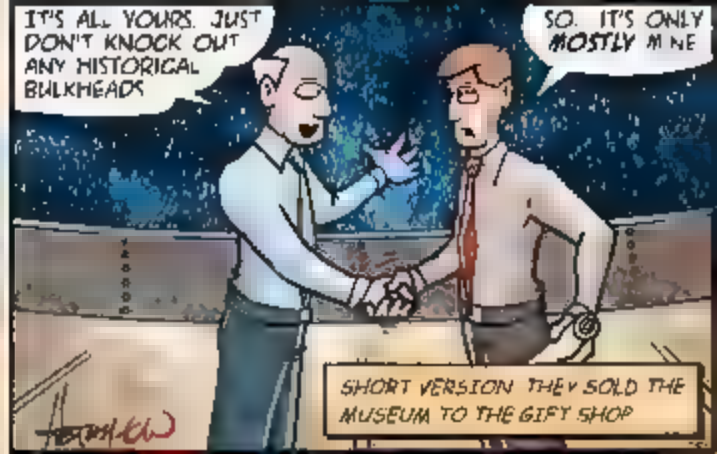

Doctor, what am I supposed to do? If Tagon hates me, I cannot fulfil my purpose!
TAILOR, I'M A DOCTOR, NOT A ROBOTICIST. I CAN'T HELP YOU WITH YOUR PROGRAMMING.
WAIT. YOUR INSTRUCTIONS ARE TO CREATE CLOTHING FOR THE CAPTAIN, RIGHT?
Yes, and whenever I get close to him he threatens to kill me!
SHHH.
LISTEN.
AS OUR COMMANDING OFFICER, TAGON IS RESPONSIBLE FOR EQUIPPING EVERY SOLDIER IN THE COMPANY
SO. CAN YOU FULFIL YOUR MISSION BY CREATING NEW CLOTHING FOR ME?
This might work, but I'm going to have to padlock a couple of logic gates.


I can do this, Doctor. I can create clothing for you.
Allow me to demonstrate how I can tailor to your build and your personality.
As a doctor you are both compassionate and calculating.
Physically, you are buxom yet lithe, both firmly athletic and softly luscious.
In terms of the materials of my trade, you exemplify "leather and lace."
DO THEY TEACH EVERYBODY TO TALK SEXY LIKE THAT IN ROBO-TAILOR SCHOOL?
I can dial it back if you want me to.

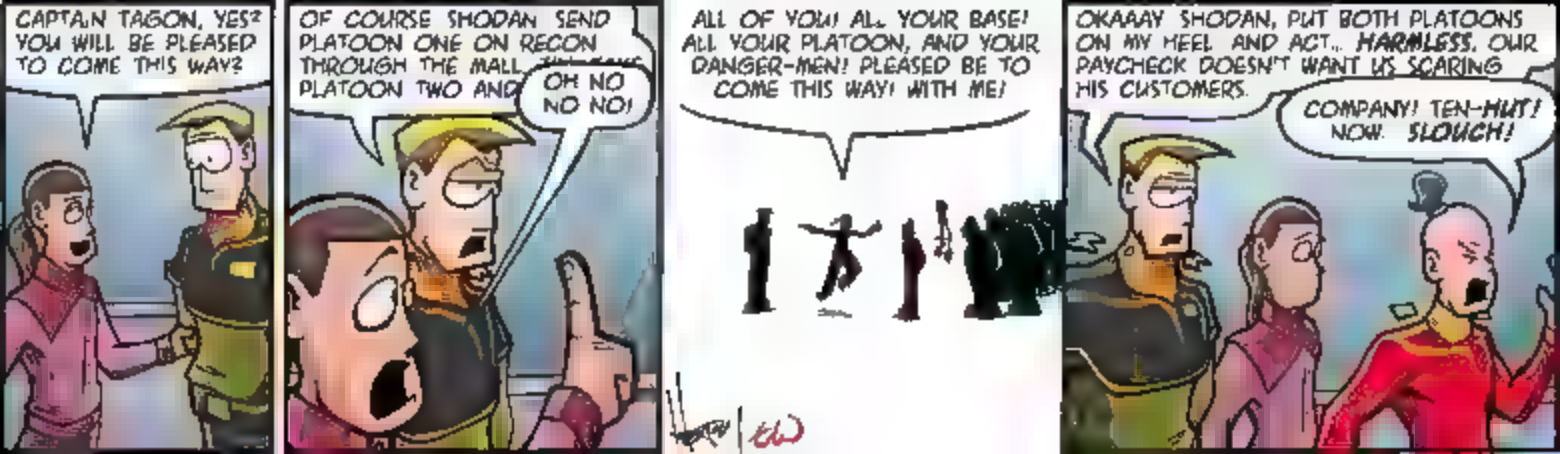



PARKED AT THE MOON EARTH L1 LIBRATION POINT IT SERVED AS THE FIRST PIT STOP ALONG HUMANITY'S HIGHWAY INTO SPACE


CHEAP ENERGY RENDERED IT IRRELEVANT IN SPITE OF NEW DEVELOPMENT AROUND MELT "OLD MELONE" WAS STATION SPENT OVER 900 YEARS ALTERNATING BETWEEN GHOST TOWN AND "HISTORICAL LANDMARK"
TWO YEARS AGO U.N.S BUDGET CUTS OPENED THE DOOR TO A FREE ENTERPRISE SOLUTION.

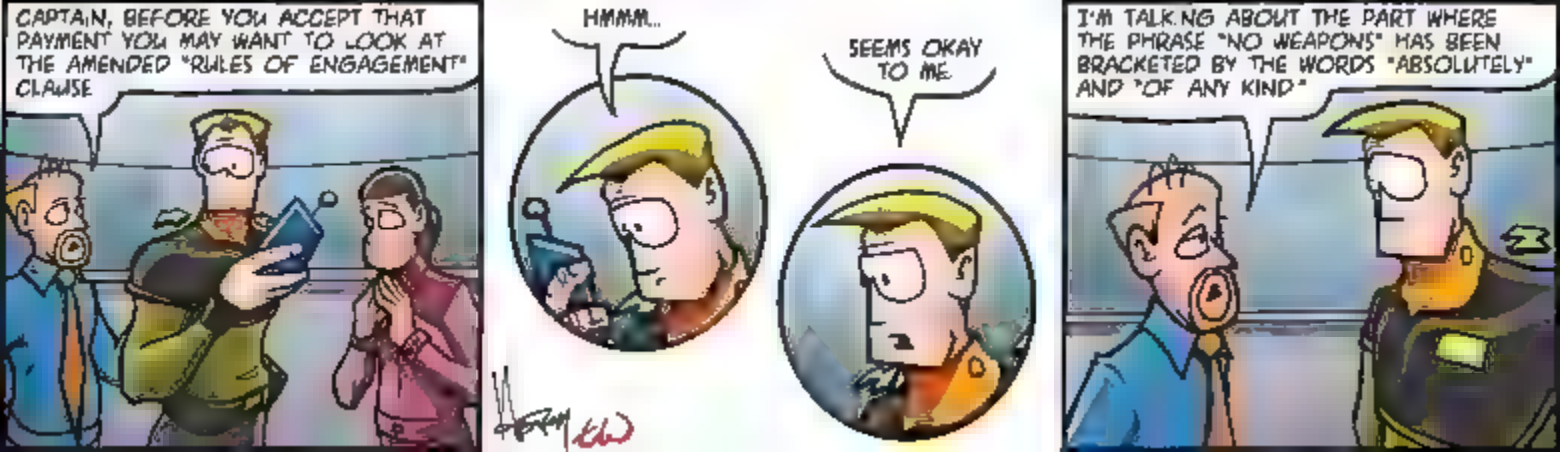

IT'S ALL YOURS. JUST DON'T KNOCK OUT ANY HISTORICAL BULKHEADS
SO. IT'S ONLY MOSTLY MINE
SHORT VERSION THEY SOLD THE MUSEUM TO THE GIFT SHOP

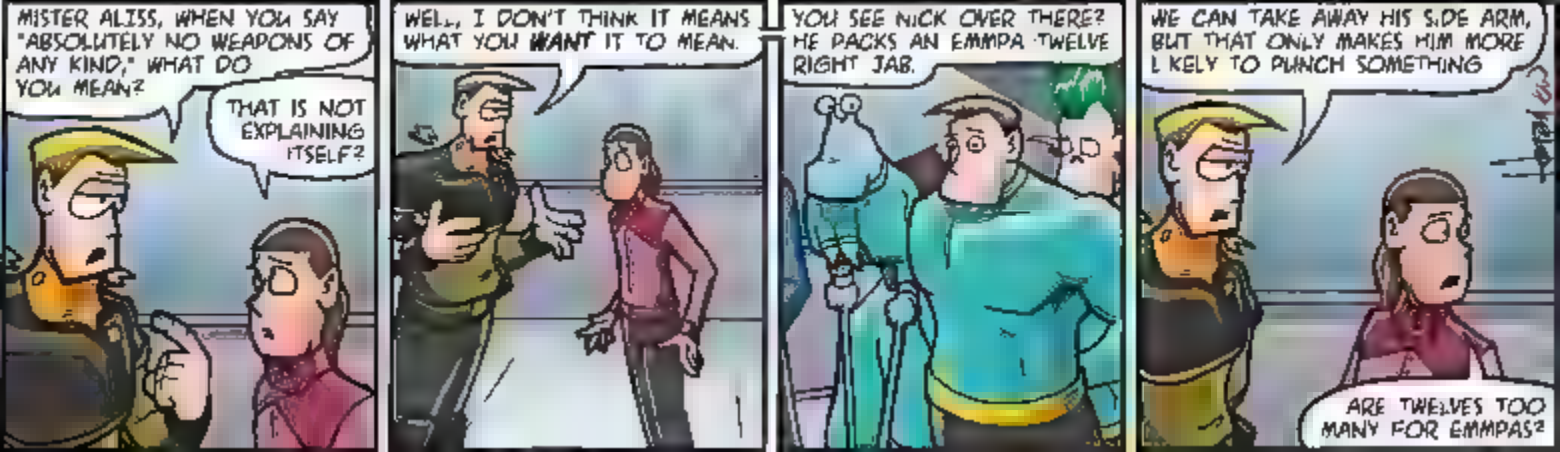

ARRIVAL, "MALL-ONE AT TERRALUNA WAY"
WATCH YOUR STEP. WE'VE ONLY GOT ABOUT A TENTH EARTH-GRAVITY ON THIS LEVEL.
NO GRAVITICS?
"HISTORICAL ACCURACY" ONE REVOLUTION PER MINUTE, MAX GEE IS AROUND 1/3
THE ORIGINAL CREW HAD GYM AND SLEEP QUARTERS IN TETHER-CLIMBING CARS 200 METERS BELOW THE LOWEST DECK.
I NEVER WOULD HAVE PEGGED YOU AS A HISTORIAN, CAPTAIN.
WHEN I SAY "JUMP" I WANT TO KNOW HOW HIGH UP MY TROOPS ARE GOING TO GO
BUT I STILL EXPECT THEM TO ASK ME "HOW HIGH" ON THE WAY UP


CAPTAIN TAGON, YES? YOU WILL BE PLEASED TO COME THIS WAY?
OF COURSE SHODAN. SEND PLATOON ONE ON RECON THROUGH THE MALL [illegible] PLATOON TWO AND
OH NO NO NO!
ALL OF YOU! ALL YOUR BASE! ALL YOUR PLATOON, AND YOUR DANGER-MEN! PLEASED BE TO COME THIS WAY! WITH ME!
OKAAAY SHODAN, PUT BOTH PLATOONS ON MY HEEL AND ACT... HARMLESS. OUR PAYCHECK DOESN'T WANT US SCARING HIS CUSTOMERS.
COMPANY! TEN-HUT! NOW. SLOUCH!

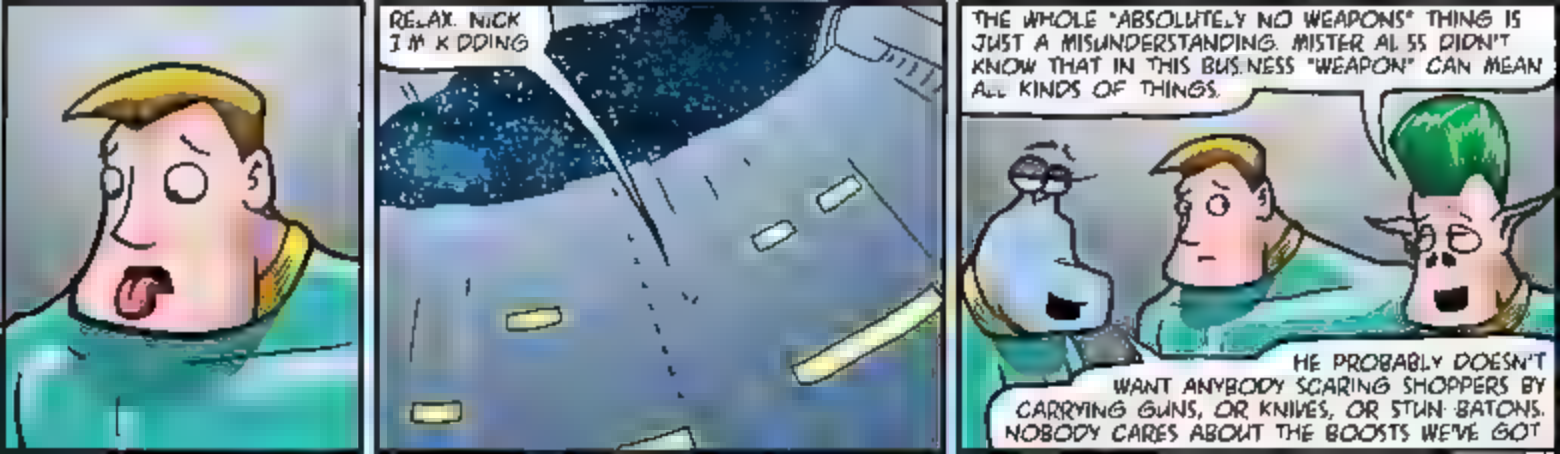

THE SLOUCHING, IT IS NO BETTER! IT FRIGHTENS! YOUR SOLDIERS, THEY LOOK NOW LIKE LIKE SULLEN APES, WITH ANGER!
THAT'S BECAUSE SOME OF THEM ARE APES
I AM UNDONE! THEY WILL KILL ME NOW?

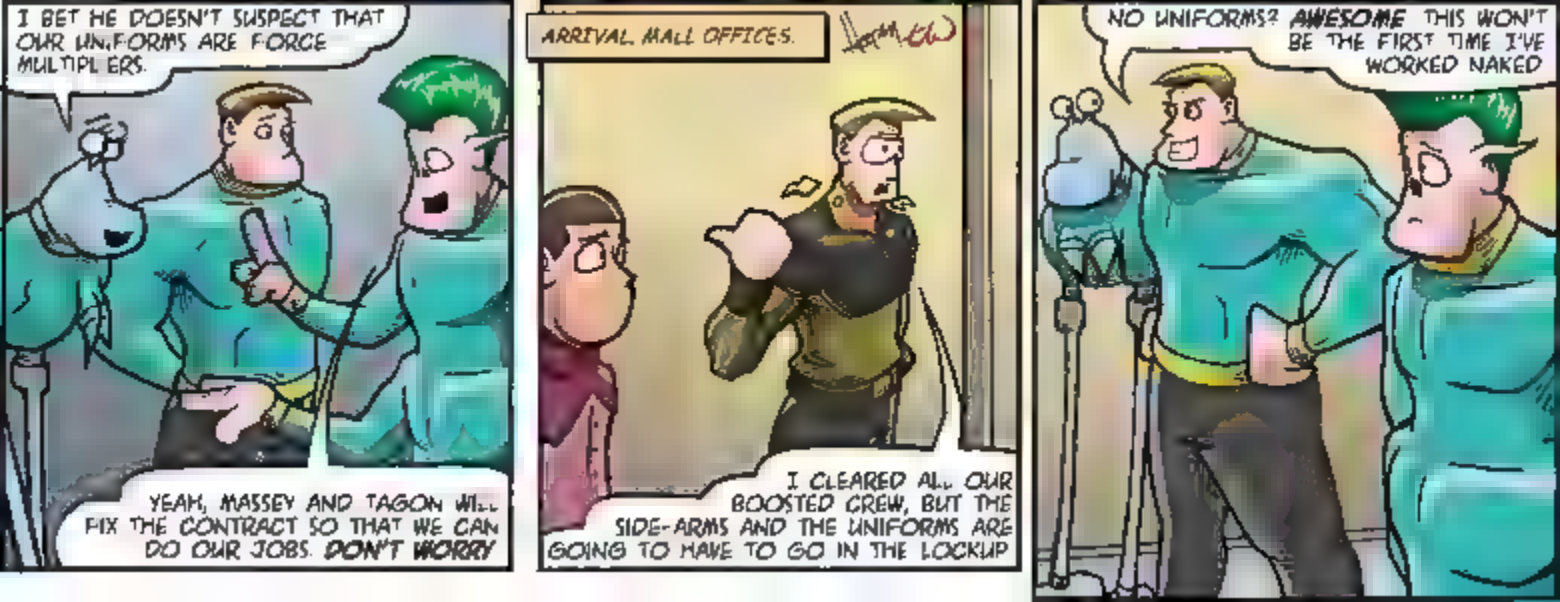

RELAX. WE'RE VERY DANGEROUS PEOPLE, BUT WE'RE ON YOUR SIDE, OKAY?
WE'RE ALL PROFESSIONALS, AND YOU'RE THE ONE WRITING OUR PAYCHECKS.
AH. GOOD THEN, FOR WELL AND EVER, FEARS UNFOUNDED I WILL BE RELAXING
OF COURSE, NOW WOULD BE A GOOD TIME FOR THAT HALF IN ADVANCE.

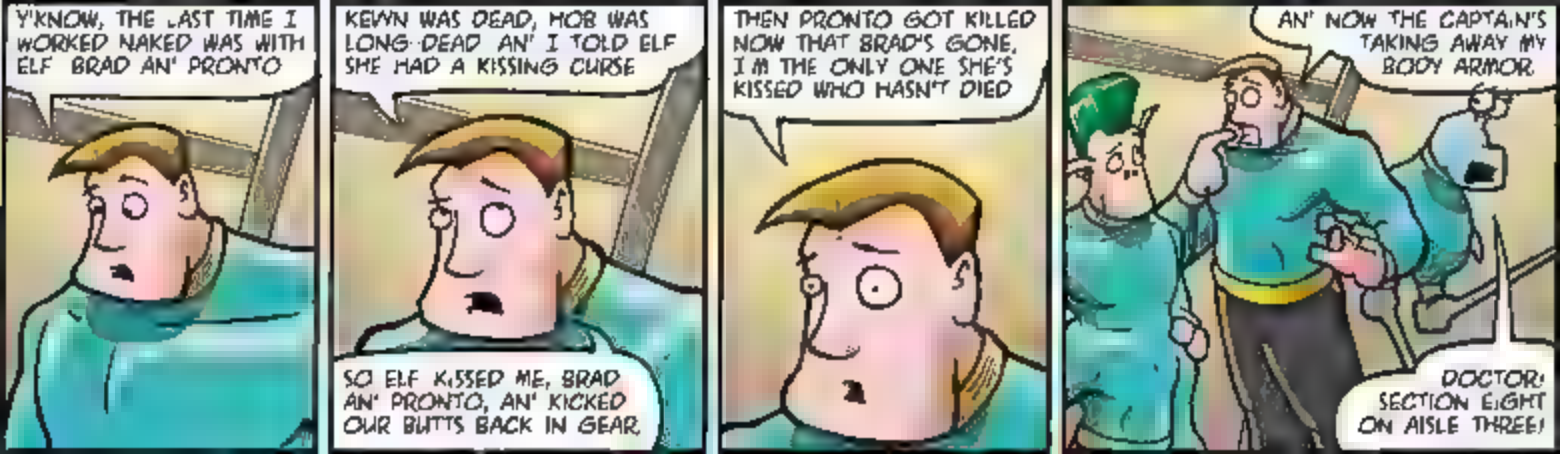

CAPTAIN, BEFORE YOU ACCEPT THAT PAYMENT YOU MAY WANT TO LOOK AT THE AMENDED "RULES OF ENGAGEMENT" CLAUSE
HMMM...
SEEMS OKAY TO ME
I'M TALKING ABOUT THE PART WHERE THE PHRASE "NO WEAPONS" HAS BEEN BRACKETED BY THE WORDS "ABSOLUTELY" AND "OF ANY KIND"

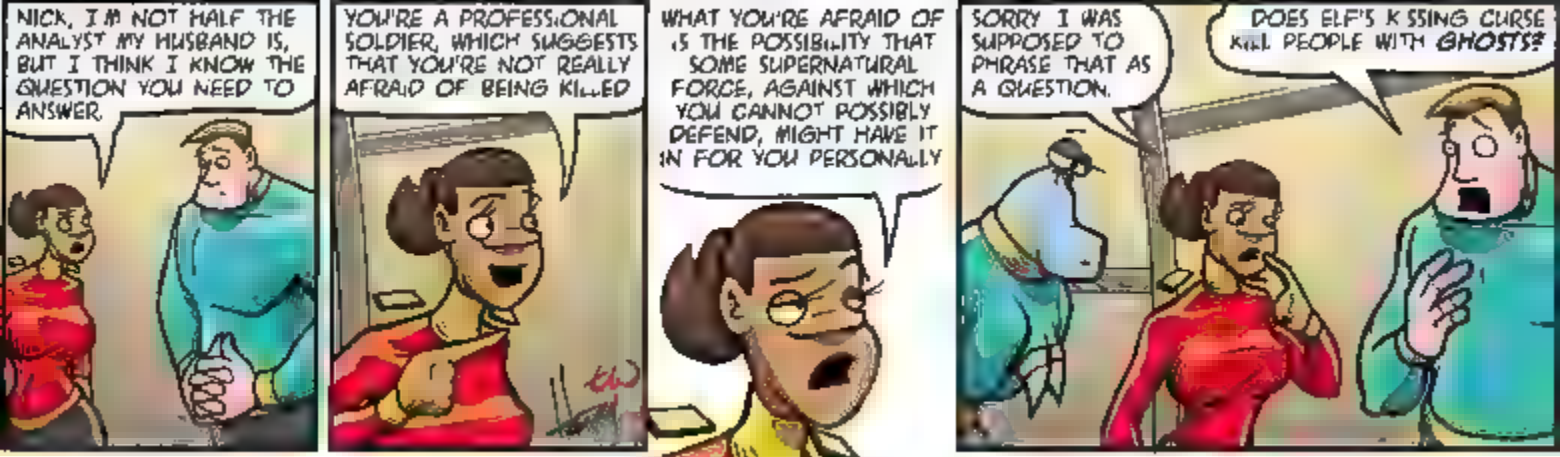

MISTER ALISS, WHEN YOU SAY "ABSOLUTELY NO WEAPONS OF ANY KIND," WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
THAT IS NOT EXPLAINING ITSELF?
WELL, I DON'T THINK IT MEANS WHAT YOU WANT IT TO MEAN.
YOU SEE NICK OVER THERE? HE PACKS AN EMMPA TWELVE RIGHT JAB.
WE CAN TAKE AWAY HIS SIDE ARM, BUT THAT ONLY MAKES HIM MORE LIKELY TO PUNCH SOMETHING
ARE TWELVES TOO MANY FOR EMMPAS?


MAIL ONE SERVICE LIFT DESCENDING TO MAIL OFFICES
DON'T WORRY, NICK MASSEY AND THE CAPTAIN WILL GET THIS STRAIGHTENED OUT
BUT WHAT IF THEY DON'T? I DON'T THINK I WANT THIS JOB IF WE HAVE TO CUT OFF MY HANDS.
IF IT COMES TO THAT, YOU'LL DO FINE HANDS ARE OVER-RATED YOU JUST NEED A GOOD PREHENSILE TONGUE


RELAX. NICK
I M K DDING
THE WHOLE "ABSOLUTELY NO WEAPONS" THING IS JUST A MISUNDERSTANDING. MISTER AL 55 DIDN'T KNOW THAT IN THIS BUS.NESS "WEAPON" CAN MEAN ALL KINDS OF THINGS.
HE PROBABLY DOESN'T WANT ANYBODY SCARING SHOPPERS BY CARRYING GUNS, OR KNIVES, OR STUN BATONS. NOBODY CARES ABOUT THE BOOSTS WE'VE GOT

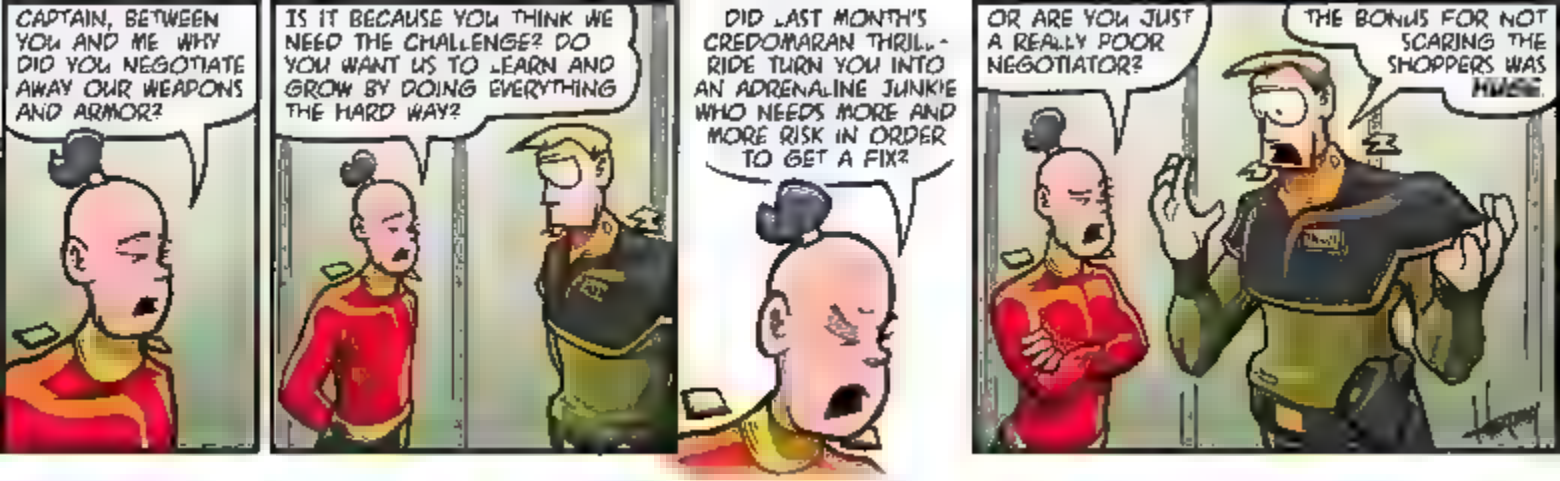

I BET HE DOESN'T SUSPECT THAT OUR UNIFORMS ARE FORCE MULTIPLIERS.
YEAH, MASSEY AND TAGON WILL FIX THE CONTRACT SO THAT WE CAN DO OUR JOBS. DON'T WORRY
ARRIVAL. MALL OFFICES.
I CLEARED ALL OUR BOOSTED CREW, BUT THE SIDE-ARMS AND THE UNIFORMS ARE GOING TO HAVE TO GO IN THE LOCKUP
NO UNIFORMS? AWESOME THIS WON'T BE THE FIRST TIME I'VE WORKED NAKED

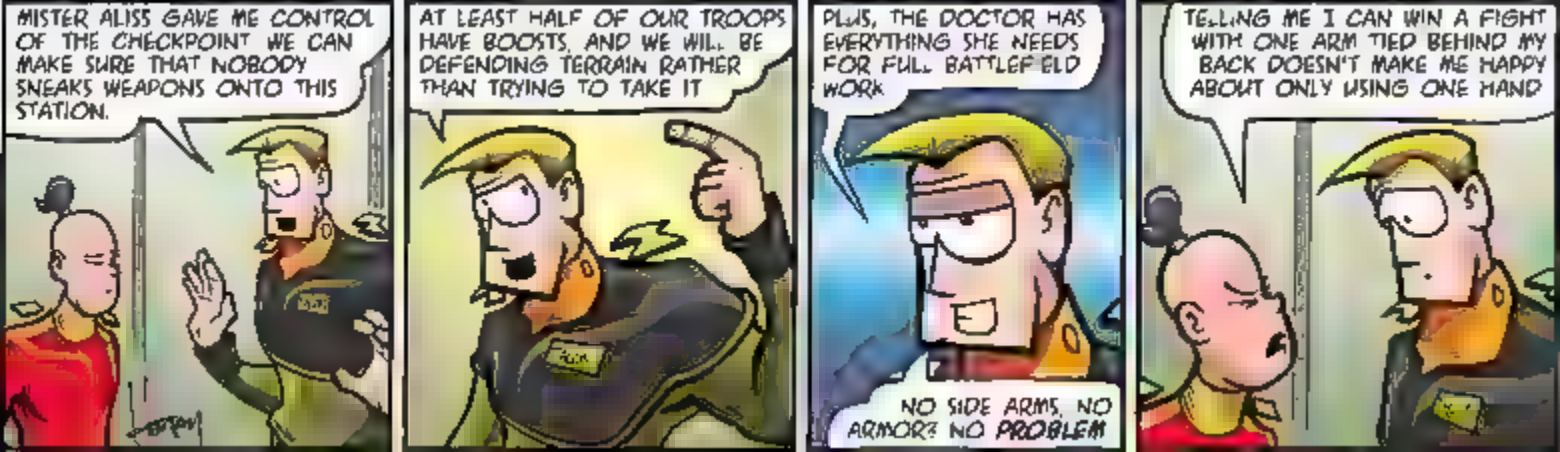

Y'KNOW, THE LAST TIME I WORKED NAKED WAS WITH ELF BRAD AN' PRONTO
KEVYN WAS DEAD, HOB WAS LONG DEAD AN' I TOLD ELF SHE HAD A KISSING CURSE
SO ELF KISSED ME, BRAD AN' PRONTO, AN' KICKED OUR BUTTS BACK IN GEAR
THEN PRONTO GOT KILLED NOW THAT BRAD'S GONE, I'M THE ONLY ONE SHE'S KISSED WHO HASN'T DIED
AN' NOW THE CAPTAIN'S TAKING AWAY MY BODY ARMOR
DOCTOR! SECTION EIGHT ON AISLE THREE!

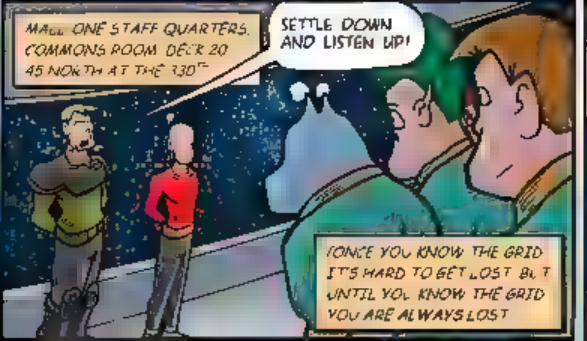

NICK, I'M NOT HALF THE ANALYST MY HUSBAND IS, BUT I THINK I KNOW THE QUESTION YOU NEED TO ANSWER.
YOU'RE A PROFESSIONAL SOLDIER, WHICH SUGGESTS THAT YOU'RE NOT REALLY AFRAID OF BEING KILLED
WHAT YOU'RE AFRAID OF IS THE POSSIBILITY THAT SOME SUPERNATURAL FORCE, AGAINST WHICH YOU CANNOT POSSIBLY DEFEND, MIGHT HAVE IT IN FOR YOU PERSONALLY
SORRY I WAS SUPPOSED TO PHRASE THAT AS A QUESTION.
DOES ELF'S KISSING CURSE KILL PEOPLE WITH GHOSTS?

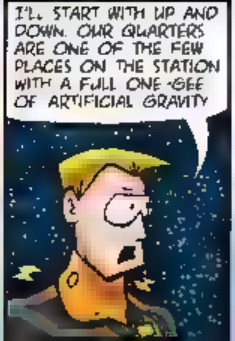

DOCTOR, YOU'RE NOT VERY GOOD AT THIS. LET ME TALK TO NICK FOR A MOMENT
NICK, CURSES ARE FUNNY THINGS BUT THERE'S ALWAYS A WAY TO BREAK 'EM.
I BET YOU CAN BREAK ELF'S KISSING CURSE BY GETTING SOMEBODY ELSE TO KISS YOU. HOB, KEVYN, PRONTO, AND BRAD NEVER TRIED THAT
DOC, I KNOW YOU'RE MARRIED BUT YOU'VE GOT TO KISS ME OR I'LL DIE
OKAY, THIS? THIS IS NOT GOOD THERAPY
BUT I BET IT WILL WORK

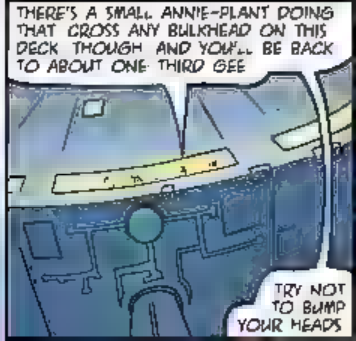

NICK, I'M NOT GOING TO KISS YOU. IT WOULDN'T BE RIGHT
YOU WANT ME TO DIE?
NO, IT'S.. UMM.
IT WON'T WORK I CAN'T BREAK THE CURSE
YOU NEED TO FIND SOMEONE SINGLE WHO DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT THE CURSE ONLY A PURE. FREELY OFFERED KISS WILL DO.
YOU DO REALIZE THAT YOU JUST TURNED MY QUICK FIX INTO A QUEST
I M SURE I JUST VIOLATED MY HIPPOCRATIC OATH ON SOMEBODY
ANYBODY GOT SOME COLOGNE I CAN BORROW?

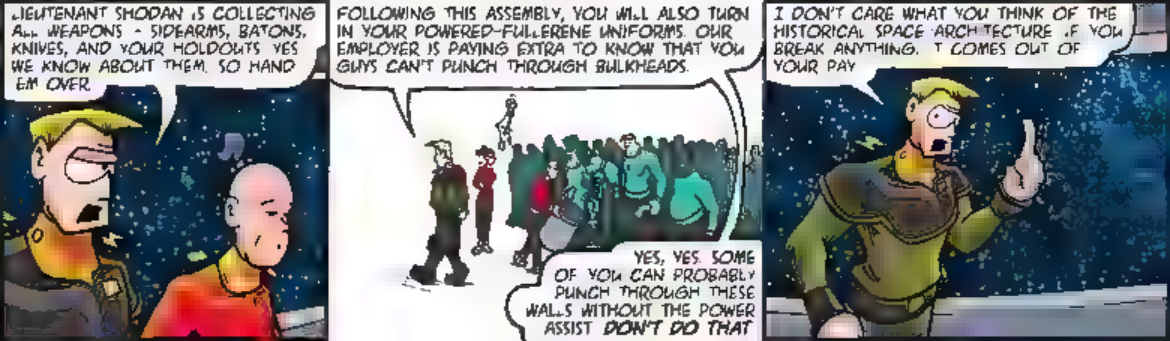

CAPTAIN, BETWEEN YOU AND ME WHY DID YOU NEGOTIATE AWAY OUR WEAPONS AND ARMOR?
IS IT BECAUSE YOU THINK WE NEED THE CHALLENGE? DO YOU WANT US TO LEARN AND GROW BY DOING EVERYTHING THE HARD WAY?
DID LAST MONTH'S CREDOMARAN THRILL-RIDE TURN YOU INTO AN ADRENALINE JUNKIE WHO NEEDS MORE AND MORE RISK IN ORDER TO GET A FIX?
OR ARE YOU JUST A REALLY POOR NEGOTIATOR?
THE BONUS FOR NOT SCARING THE SHOPPERS WAS HUGE.

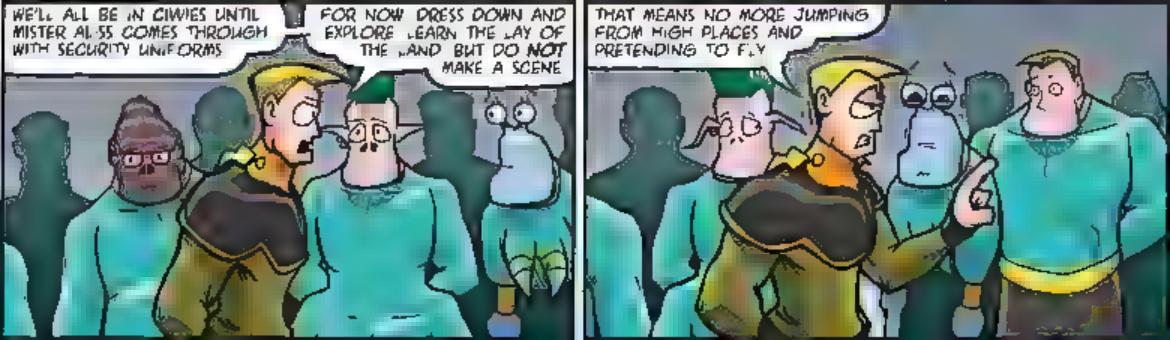

MISTER ALISS GAVE ME CONTROL OF THE CHECKPOINT WE CAN MAKE SURE THAT NOBODY SNEAKS WEAPONS ONTO THIS STATION.
AT LEAST HALF OF OUR TROOPS HAVE BOOSTS, AND WE WILL BE DEFENDING TERRAIN RATHER THAN TRYING TO TAKE IT
PLUS, THE DOCTOR HAS EVERYTHING SHE NEEDS FOR FULL BATTLEFIELD WORK
NO SIDE ARMS, NO ARMOR? NO PROBLEM
TELLING ME I CAN WIN A FIGHT WITH ONE ARM TIED BEHIND MY BACK DOESN'T MAKE ME HAPPY ABOUT ONLY USING ONE HAND

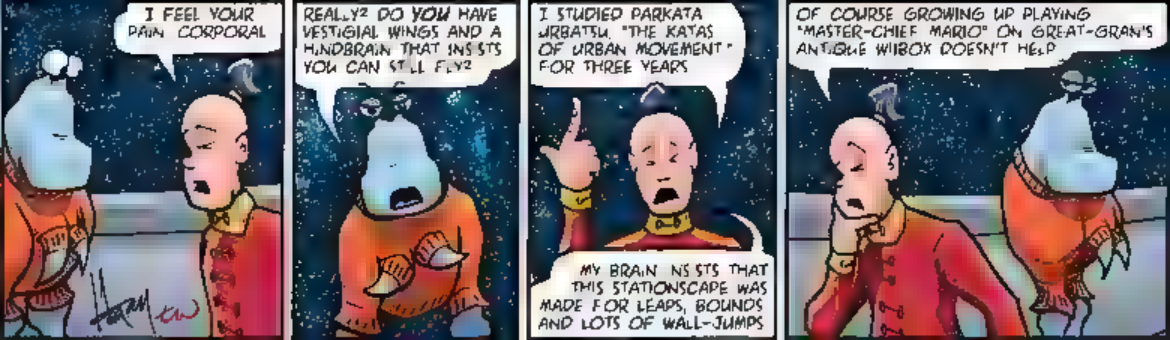

MAGE ONE STAFF QUARTERS. COMMONS ROOM. DECK 20 45 NORTH AT THE 330TH
SETTLE DOWN AND LISTEN UP!
ONCE YOU KNOW THE GRID IT'S HARD TO GET LOST BUT UNTIL YOU KNOW THE GRID YOU ARE ALWAYS LOST


I'LL START WITH UP AND DOWN. OUR QUARTERS ARE ONE OF THE FEW PLACES ON THE STATION WITH A FULL ONE-GEE OF ARTIFICIAL GRAVITY

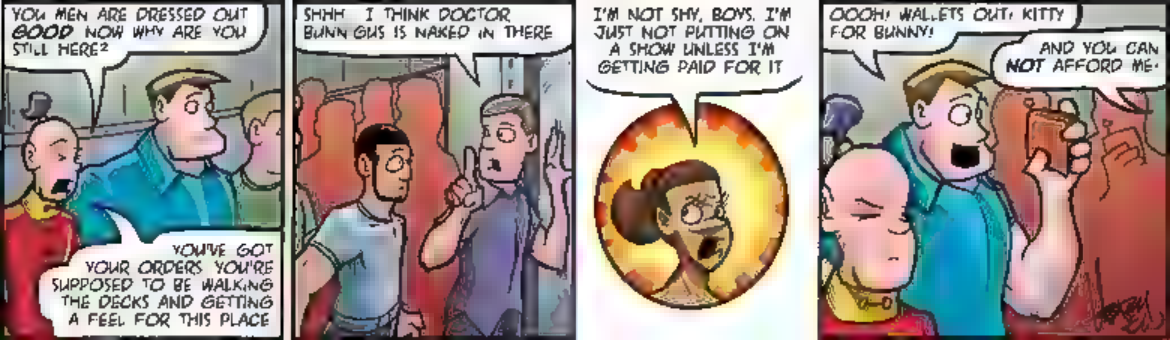

THERE'S A SMALL ANNIE-PLANT DOING THAT CROSS ANY BULKHEAD ON THIS DECK THOUGH AND YOU'LL BE BACK TO ABOUT ONE-THIRD GEE
TRY NOT TO BUMP YOUR HEADS


LIEUTENANT SHODAN IS COLLECTING ALL WEAPONS - SIDEARMS, BATONS, KNIVES, AND YOUR HOLDOUTS YES WE KNOW ABOUT THEM. SO HAND 'EM OVER.
FOLLOWING THIS ASSEMBLY, YOU WILL ALSO TURN IN YOUR POWERED-FULLERENE UNIFORMS. OUR EMPLOYER IS PAYING EXTRA TO KNOW THAT YOU GUYS CAN'T PUNCH THROUGH BULKHEADS.
YES, YES. SOME OF YOU CAN PROBABLY PUNCH THROUGH THESE WALLS WITHOUT THE POWER ASSIST *DON'T DO THAT*
I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU THINK OF THE HISTORICAL SPACE ARCHITECTURE. IF YOU BREAK ANYTHING, IT COMES OUT OF YOUR PAY

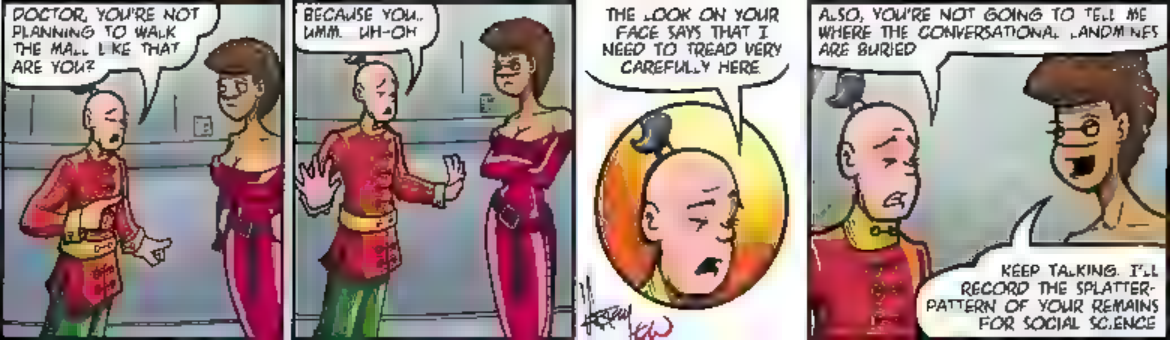

WE'LL ALL BE IN CIVIES UNTIL MISTER ALISS COMES THROUGH WITH SECURITY UNIFORMS
FOR NOW DRESS DOWN AND EXPLORE LEARN THE LAY OF THE LAND BUT DO NOT MAKE A SCENE
THAT MEANS NO MORE JUMPING FROM HIGH PLACES AND PRETENDING TO FLY

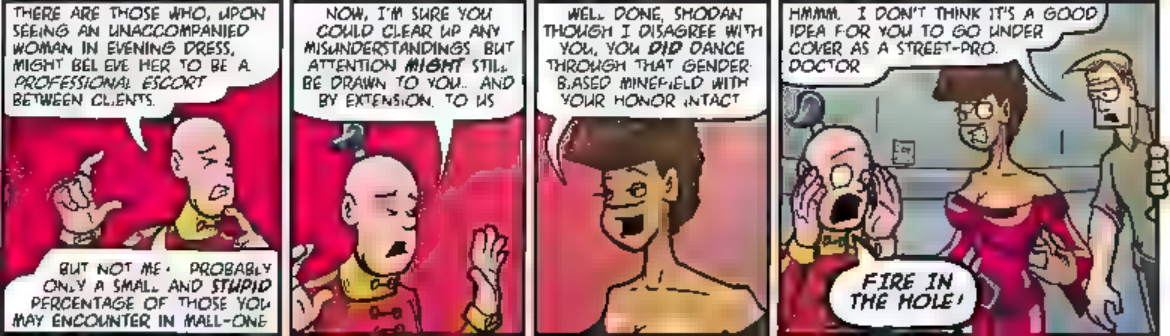

I FEEL YOUR PAIN CORPORAL
REALLY? DO YOU HAVE VESTIGIAL WINGS AND A HINDBRAIN THAT INSISTS YOU CAN STILL FLY?
I STUDIED PARKATA URBATSU. "THE KATAS OF URBAN MOVEMENT" FOR THREE YEARS
MY BRAIN INSISTS THAT THIS STATIONSCAPE WAS MADE FOR LEAPS, BOUNDS AND LOTS OF WALL-JUMPS
OF COURSE GROWING UP PLAYING "MASTER-CHIEF MARIO" ON GREAT-GRAN'S ANTIQUE WIIBOX DOESN'T HELP

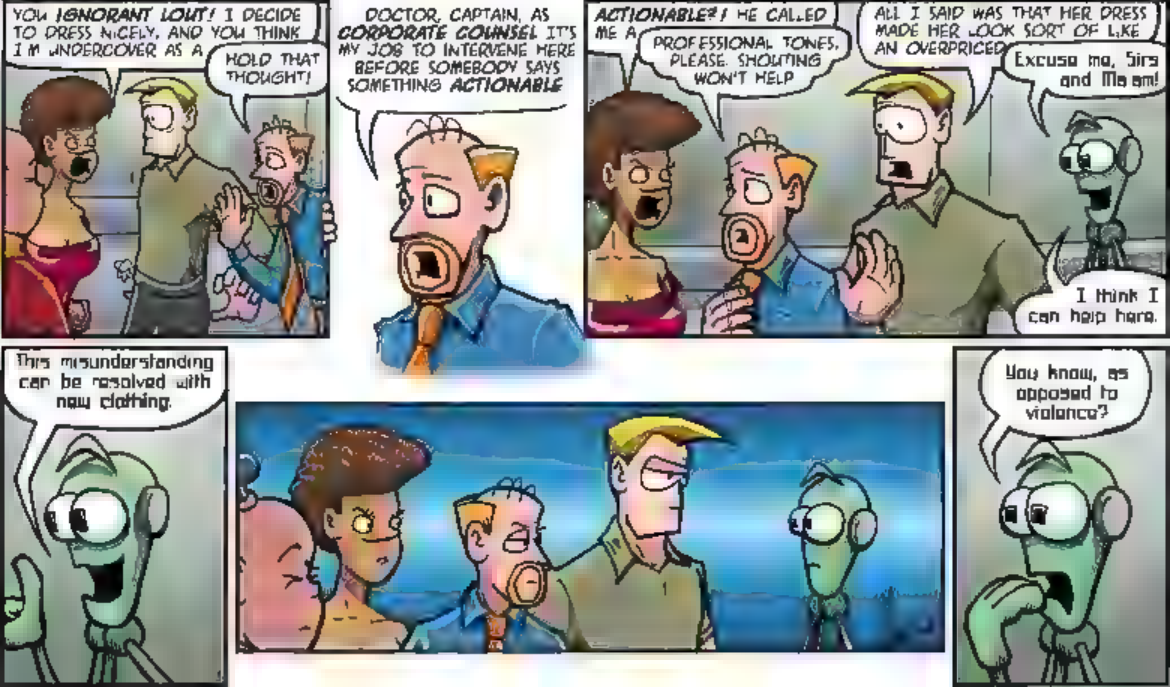

You ask him! I'm too frightened!
OKAY, OKAY, YOU BIG CHICKEN.
CAPTAIN, I THINK TAILOR HERE CAN PROBABLY COME UP WITH BETTER SECURITY UNIFORMS THAN WHAT MISTER ALISS PROVIDES.
GOOD IDEA. HAVE HIM SLAP SOMETHING TOGETHER. IT DOESN'T MATTER IF IT'S UGLY
Captain, you wound me!
I DON'T USUALLY AIM TO WOUND
Aaaie! Frightened again!

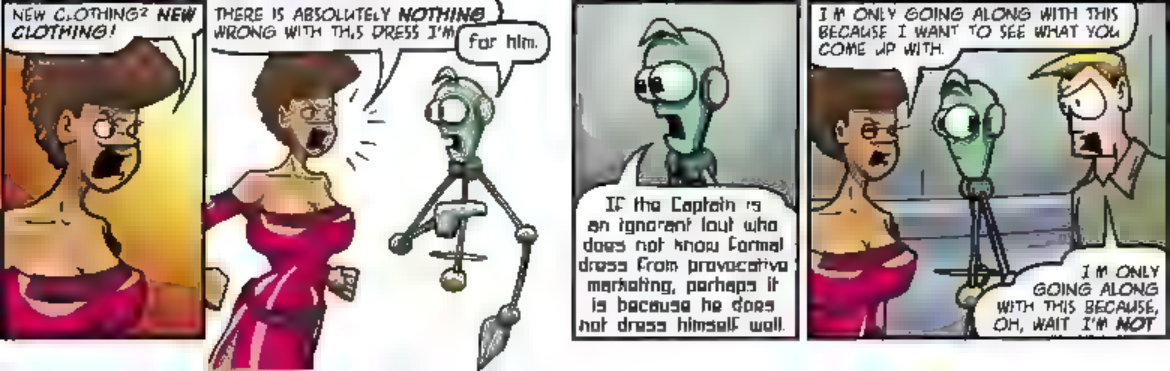

YOU MEN ARE DRESSED OUT GOOD NOW WHY ARE YOU STILL HERE?
YOU'VE GOT YOUR ORDERS YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE WALKING THE DECKS AND GETTING A FEEL FOR THIS PLACE
SHHH I THINK DOCTOR BUNN GUS IS NAKED IN THERE
I'M NOT SHY, BOYS. I'M JUST NOT PUTTING ON A SHOW UNLESS I'M GETTING PAID FOR IT
OOOH! WALLETS OUT, KITTY FOR BUNNY!
AND YOU CAN NOT AFFORD ME.

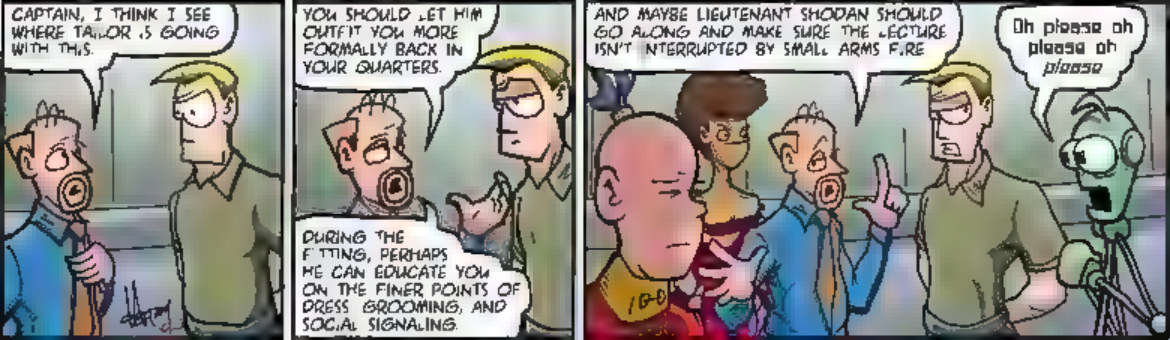

IT'S OKAY DOCTOR. THEY'RE GONE
I DON'T SEE WHAT THE BIG DEAL IS, THOUGH. YOU USED TO DANCE FOR A LIVING YOUR STREET CLOTHES CAN'T POSSIBLY BE ANY WORSE THAN
WHUHHHH
TAILOR MADE AN EVENING GOWN FOR ME
THE "BIG DEAL" IS THAT I DIDN'T WANT TO HAVE TO TREAT A DOZEN CASES OF CATATONIA AT ONCE.
DON'T ADMINISTER. STIMULANTS.


DOCTOR, YOU'RE NOT PLANNING TO WALK THE MALL LIKE THAT ARE YOU?
BECAUSE YOU... UMM... UH-OH
THE LOOK ON YOUR FACE SAYS THAT I NEED TO TREAD VERY CAREFULLY HERE
ALSO, YOU'RE NOT GOING TO TELL ME WHERE THE CONVERSATIONAL LANDMINES ARE BURIED
KEEP TALKING. I'LL RECORD THE SPLATTER-PATTERN OF YOUR REMAINS FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE


THERE ARE THOSE WHO, UPON SEEING AN UNACCOMPANIED WOMAN IN EVENING DRESS, MIGHT BELIEVE HER TO BE A PROFESSIONAL ESCORT BETWEEN CLIENTS.
BUT NOT ME. PROBABLY ONLY A SMALL AND STUPID PERCENTAGE OF THOSE YOU MAY ENCOUNTER IN MALL-ONE
NOW, I'M SURE YOU COULD CLEAR UP ANY MISUNDERSTANDINGS BUT ATTENTION MIGHT STILL BE DRAWN TO YOU.. AND BY EXTENSION, TO US
WELL DONE, SHODAN! THOUGH I DISAGREE WITH YOU, YOU DID DANCE THROUGH THAT GENDER-BIASED MINEFIELD WITH YOUR HONOR INTACT
HMMM. I DON'T THINK IT'S A GOOD IDEA FOR YOU TO GO UNDER COVER AS A STREET-PRO, DOCTOR
FIRE IN THE HOLE!


YOU IGNORANT LOUT! I DECIDE TO DRESS NICELY, AND YOU THINK I'M UNDERCOVER AS A
HOLD THAT THOUGHT!
DOCTOR, CAPTAIN, AS CORPORATE COUNSEL IT'S MY JOB TO INTERVENE HERE BEFORE SOMEBODY SAYS SOMETHING ACTIONABLE
ACTIONABLE?! HE CALLED ME A
PROFESSIONAL TONES, PLEASE. SHOUTING WON'T HELP
ALL I SAID WAS THAT HER DRESS MADE HER LOOK SORT OF LIKE AN OVERPRICED
Excuse me, Sirs and Ma'am!
I think I can help here.
This misunderstanding can be resolved with new clothing.
You know, as opposed to violence?


NEW CLOTHING? NEW CLOTHING!
THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING WRONG WITH THIS DRESS I'M
for him.
If the Captain is an ignorant lout who does not know formal dress from provocative marketing, perhaps it is because he does not dress himself well.
I'M ONLY GOING ALONG WITH THIS BECAUSE I WANT TO SEE WHAT YOU COME UP WITH.
I'M ONLY GOING ALONG WITH THIS BECAUSE, OH, WAIT I'M NOT


CAPTAIN, I THINK I SEE WHERE TAILOR IS GOING WITH THIS.
YOU SHOULD LET HIM OUTFIT YOU MORE FORMALLY BACK IN YOUR QUARTERS.
DURING THE FITTING, PERHAPS HE CAN EDUCATE YOU ON THE FINER POINTS OF DRESS GROOMING, AND SOCIAL SIGNALING.
AND MAYBE LIEUTENANT SHODAN SHOULD GO ALONG AND MAKE SURE THE LECTURE ISN'T INTERRUPTED BY SMALL ARMS FIRE
Oh please oh please oh please


NOW, DOCTOR, IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO FOR YOU?
HMPH
I STILL WANT TO YELL AT SOMEBODY I DIDN'T EVEN GET TO BREAK OUT MY "IN CASE OF EMERGENCY" VOCABULARY
BUT I DON'T WANT TO YELL AT YOU
BECAUSE YOU THINK I'M HELPING?
NO, BECAUSE YOU'RE A LAWYER, AND I THINK YOU MIGHT ENJOY IT

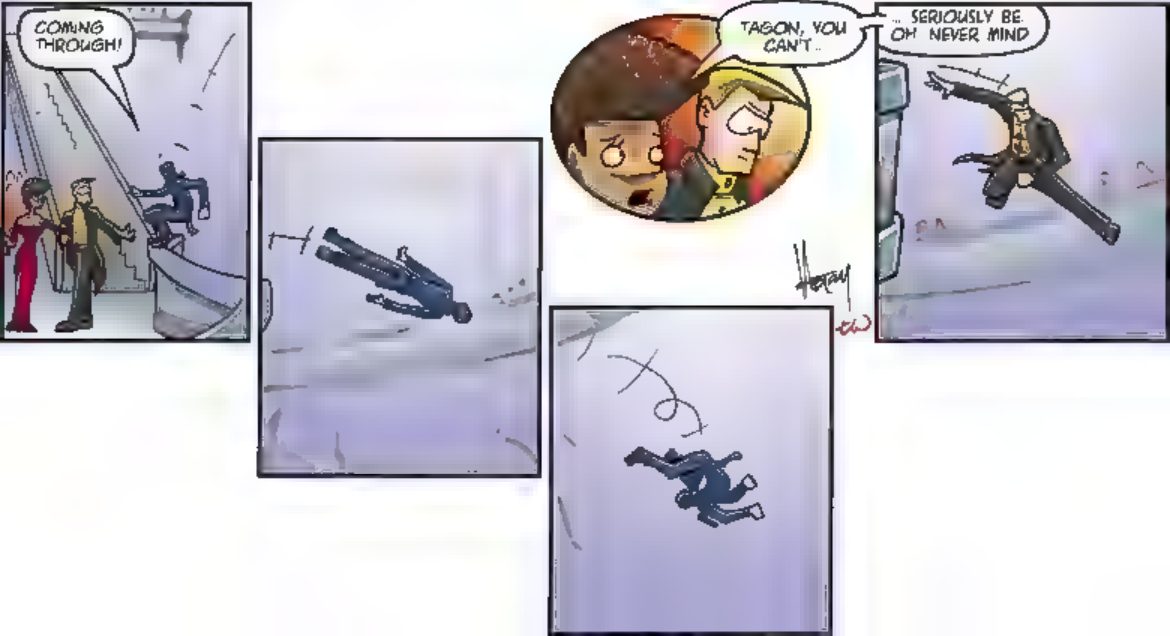

MEANWHILE AT THE MALL--ONE GALLERIA, DECK 10. DOUBLE AUGHT AT THE 190TH.
WELCOME TO SZUPA! MY NAME IS LIZ WOULD YOU LIKE TO TRY ONE OF OUR TRENDYLICIOUS SALADUPAS?
UMMM...
NICK.. HIGH PRICES, AND THEY'RE MAKING UP WORDS.
SURE!
NO, NO! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BACK AWAY WITHOUT MAKING EYE CONTACT!


ALL OF OUR SALADUPAS ARE MADE WITH ONE HUNDRED PERCENT GENECREATED FOODSMARTS.
SO... WHAT'S GOOD?
TRY THE NUMBER SIX! FRESH-PICKED TOFURKY NUGGLES ON SPINAMMONACH, PILES OF CRISPBERRIES AND RASPNUTS, ALL SWIMMING IN TRENDYLICIOUS MAPLISH SYRUP
OKAY DOES IT COME IN MY SIZE? I'M HUNGRY
TANNER! GIMME FIFTY-FIVE HUNDRED GRAMS OF NUMBER SIX.
YOU GETTING ANYTHING, LEGS?
NO. I'M GOING TO MANAGE MY APPETITE BY WATCHING YOU EAT


NICK, THAT "SALADUPA" IS AN OVERSIZED CARICATURE OF REAL FOOD
IT'S THE MOST RIDICULOUS THING I'VE EVER.
BELAY THAT CAPTAIN TAGON AND DOCTOR RUNNIGUS JUST WALKED PAST US IN DINNER FORMALS.


MALL-ONE GALLERIA. DECK 10, 10TH SOUTH AT THE 190TH
YUP. I WAS RIGHT EVERYBODY IS STARING
THEY SHOULD STARE. YOU LOOK SHARP AND I'M DROP-DEAD GORGEOUS.
WE'VE RAISED THE BAR HERE THAT'S NO MEAN FEAT IN A POSH, EXCLUSIVE SHOPPING GALLERY
WELL, IT'S MAKING ME REALLY UNCOMFORTABLE. I DON'T LIKE BEING STARED AT. NOT WHEN I DON'T KNOW WHO I'M SUPPOSED TO SHOOT
OH
YOU'RE MISSING THE POINT YOU HAVE TWO PLATOONS OF TROOPS AWKWARDLY WANDERING AROUND MALL-ONE AND NOBODY IS STARING AT THEM

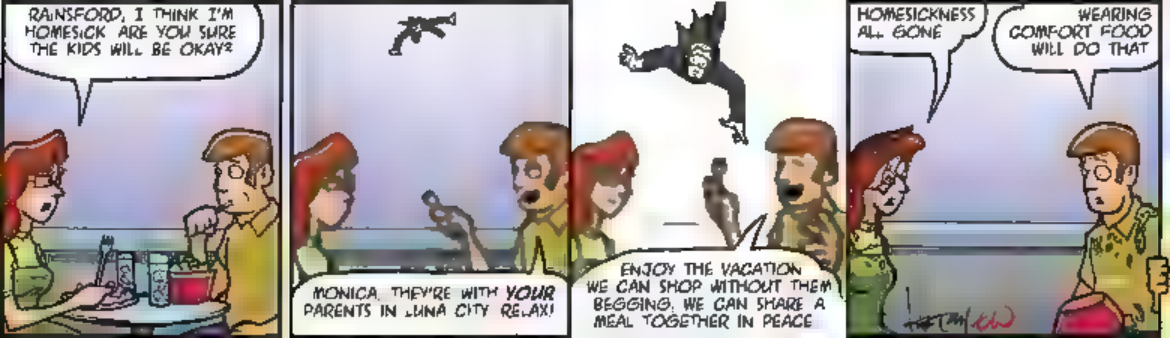

CLEVER. THERE'S A PROBLEM, THOUGH
THE TROOPS ARE STARING, TOO. THAT MEANS THEY'RE LOOKING AT US, INSTEAD OF THE MALL
THEY MIGHT BE MISSING SOMETHING IMPORTANT


COMING THROUGH!
TAGON, YOU CAN'T..
... SERIOUSLY BE. OH NEVER MIND

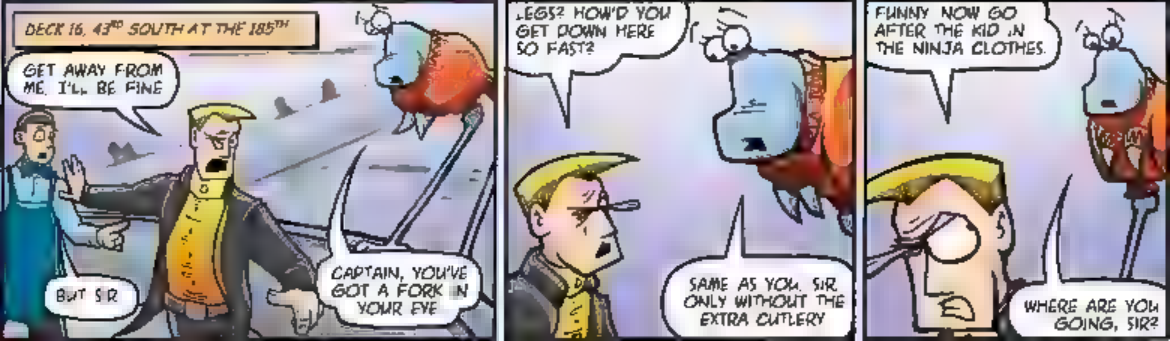

DON'T TRY TO FOLLOW ME OLD MAN! YOU'RE GOING TO GET HURT
OKAY, THAT'S
THAT'S NOT HOW YOU CALL OFF THE PURSUIT

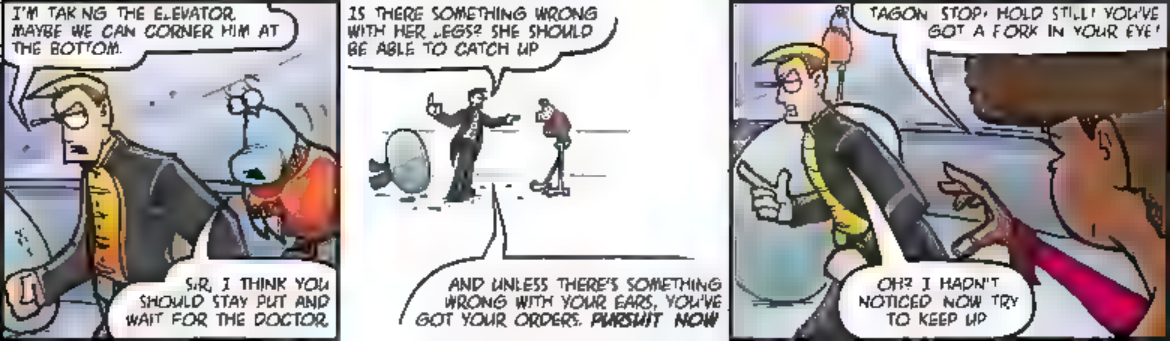

NICK, LEGS! THE CAPTAIN JUST JUMPED THE RAIL!
I SAW. HE TOLD ME NOT TO TRY FLYING IN THE LOW GEE BUT I GUESS DIFFERENT RULES APPLY TO THE BOSS
OH, YOU WANT US TO GO HELP HIM! YIPPEE!
USZ

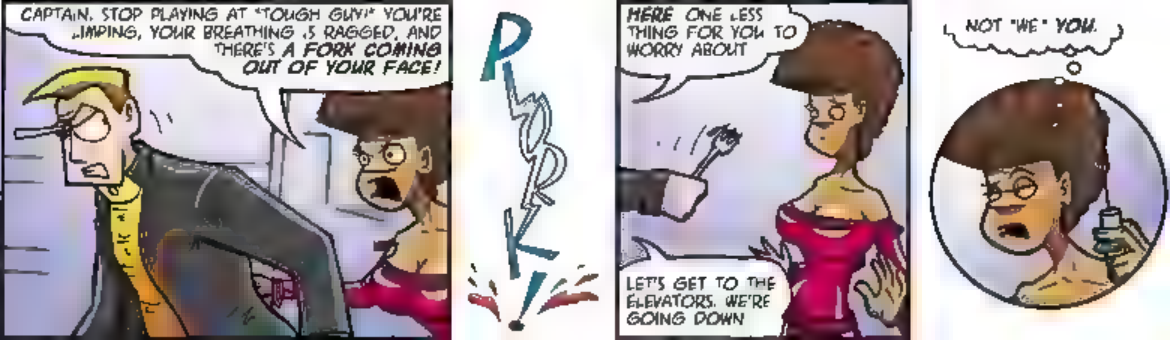

THIS KID'S GOOD, BUT HE'S NOT BOOSTED I'M STRONGER, AND MY REFLEXES ARE FASTER.
HMPH
SUIT'S NOT RESPONDING.
BECAUSE I'M NOT WEARING IT CRAP.
NO INERTIICS... NO FLIGHT.
FAST REFLEXES AREN'T GOING TO HELP IF THEY'RE THE WRONG REFLEXES.

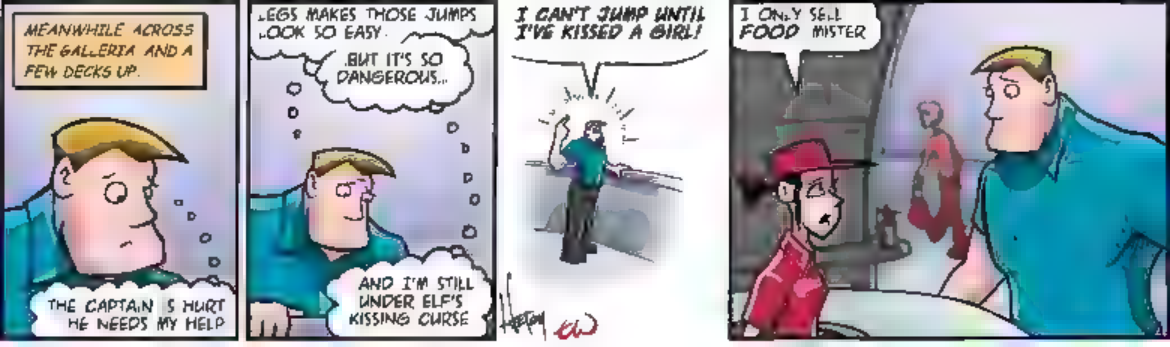

RAINSFORD, I THINK I'M HOMESICK ARE YOU SURE THE KIDS WILL BE OKAY?
MONICA, THEY'RE WITH YOUR PARENTS IN LUNA CITY RELAX!
ENJOY THE VACATION WE CAN SHOP WITHOUT THEM BEGGING. WE CAN SHARE A MEAL TOGETHER IN PEACE
HOMESICKNESS ALL GONE
WEARING COMFORT FOOD WILL DO THAT

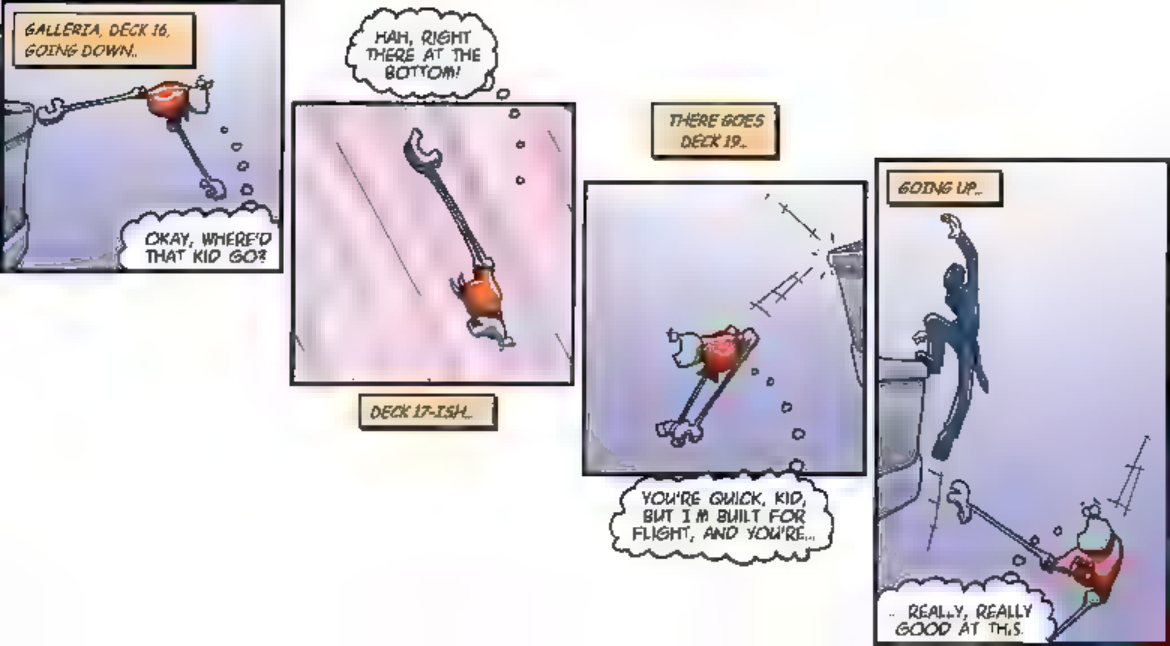

SIR, ARE YOU OKAY?
I'M FINE. I'LL JUST WIPE MY FACE AND BE ON MY WAY
SIT BACK DOWN, SIR. YOU'VE GOT SOME OF OUR SILVERWARE...
...IN YOUR EYE.
OH FORK

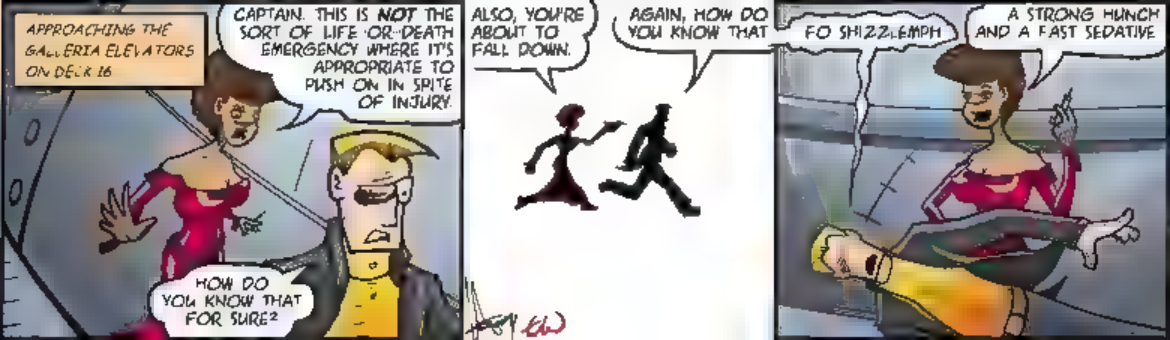

DECK 16, 43RD SOUTH AT THE 185TH
GET AWAY FROM ME. I'LL BE FINE
BUT SIR
CAPTAIN, YOU'VE GOT A FORK IN YOUR EYE
LEGS? HOW'D YOU GET DOWN HERE SO FAST?
SAME AS YOU, SIR. ONLY WITHOUT THE EXTRA CUTLERY
FUNNY. NOW GO AFTER THE KID IN THE NINJA CLOTHES.
WHERE ARE YOU GOING, SIR?


I'M TAKING THE ELEVATOR. MAYBE WE CAN CORNER HIM AT THE BOTTOM.
SIR, I THINK YOU SHOULD STAY PUT AND WAIT FOR THE DOCTOR.
IS THERE SOMETHING WRONG WITH HER LEGS? SHE SHOULD BE ABLE TO CATCH UP
AND UNLESS THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH YOUR EARS, YOU'VE GOT YOUR ORDERS. PURSUIT NOW
TAGON STOP! HOLD STILL! YOU'VE GOT A FORK IN YOUR EYE!
OH? I HADN'T NOTICED NOW TRY TO KEEP UP

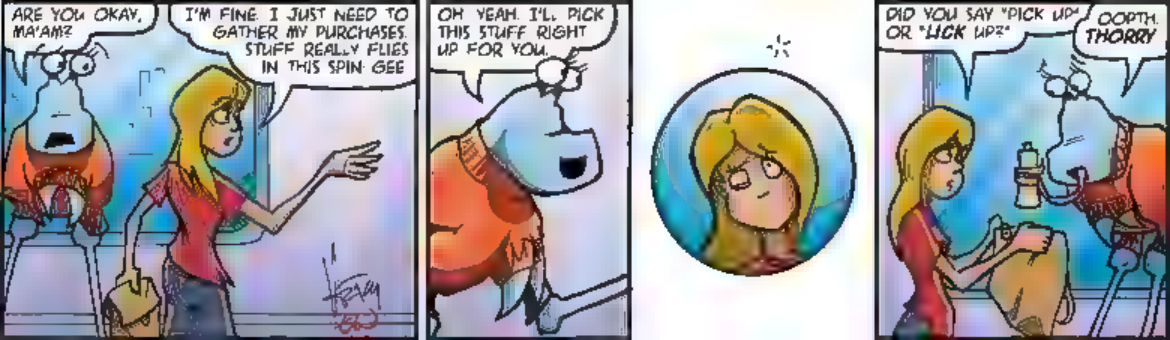

CAPTAIN. STOP PLAYING AT "TOUGH GUY!" YOU'RE LIMPING, YOUR BREATHING IS RAGGED, AND THERE'S A FORK COMING OUT OF YOUR FACE!
PARK!
HERE ONE LESS THING FOR YOU TO WORRY ABOUT
LET'S GET TO THE ELEVATORS. WE'RE GOING DOWN
NOT "WE." YOU.

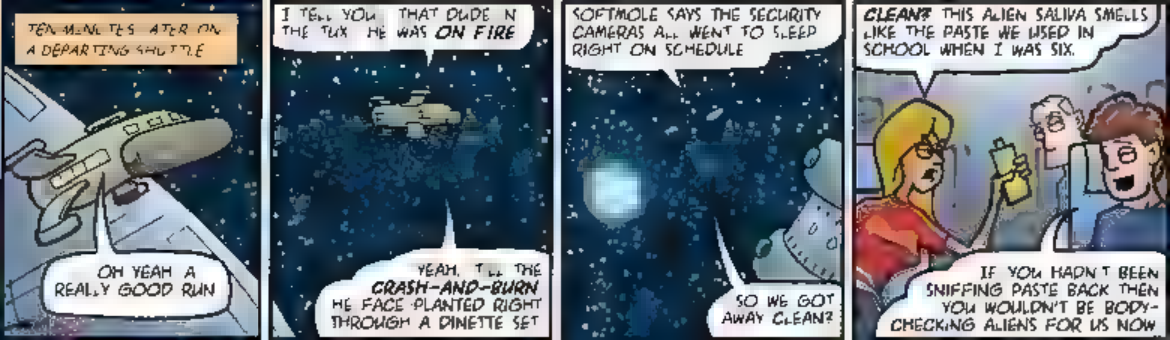

MEANWHILE ACROSS THE GALLERIA AND A FEW DECKS UP.
THE CAPTAIN S HURT HE NEEDS MY HELP
LEGS MAKES THOSE JUMPS LOOK SO EASY.
BUT IT'S SO DANGEROUS...
AND I'M STILL UNDER ELF'S KISSING CURSE
I CAN'T JUMP UNTIL I'VE KISSED A GIRL!
I ONLY SELL FOOD MISTER

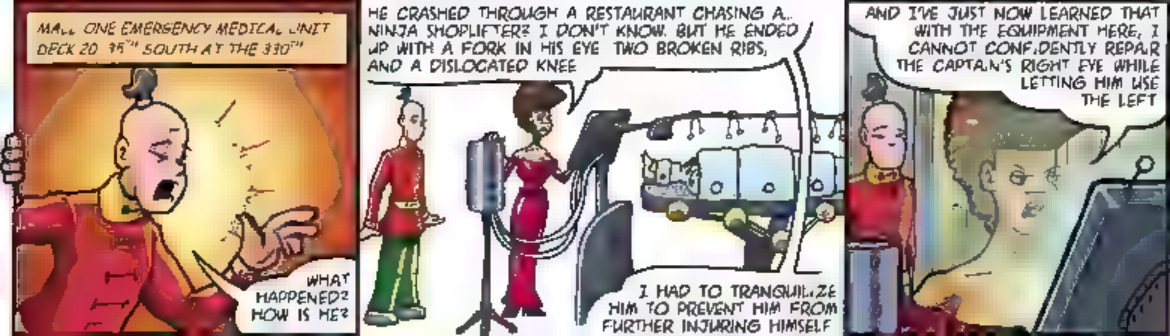

GALLERIA, DECK 16. GOING DOWN..
OKAY, WHERE'D THAT KID GO?
HAH, RIGHT THERE AT THE BOTTOM!
DECK 17-ISH..
THERE GOES DECK 19..
YOU'RE QUICK, KID, BUT I'M BUILT FOR FLIGHT, AND YOU'RE...
GOING UP..
... REALLY, REALLY GOOD AT THIS.


APPROACHING THE GALLERIA ELEVATORS ON DECK 16
CAPTAIN. THIS IS NOT THE SORT OF LIFE-OR-DEATH EMERGENCY WHERE IT'S APPROPRIATE TO PUSH ON IN SPITE OF INJURY.
HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT FOR SURE?
ALSO, YOU'RE ABOUT TO FALL DOWN.
AGAIN, HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT
FO SHIZZLEMPH
A STRONG HUNCH AND A FAST SEDATIVE

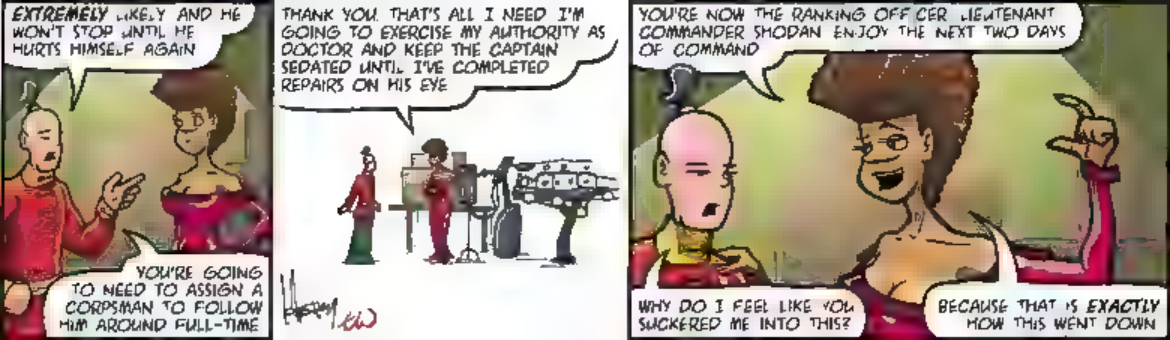

DECK 12 HOT PURSUIT
MAKE A HOLE!
MAKE A HOLE!
"MAKE A HOLE?" WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN?
IT MEANS "PLEASE PANIC AND THROW YOUR SHOPPING BAG IN MY FACE" YOU GOT IT EXACTLY RIGHT


ARE YOU OKAY, MA'AM?
I'M FINE. I JUST NEED TO GATHER MY PURCHASES. STUFF REALLY FLIES IN THIS SPIN GEE
OH YEAH. I'LL PICK THIS STUFF RIGHT UP FOR YOU.
DID YOU SAY "PICK UP" OR "LICK UP?"
OOPTH. THORRY

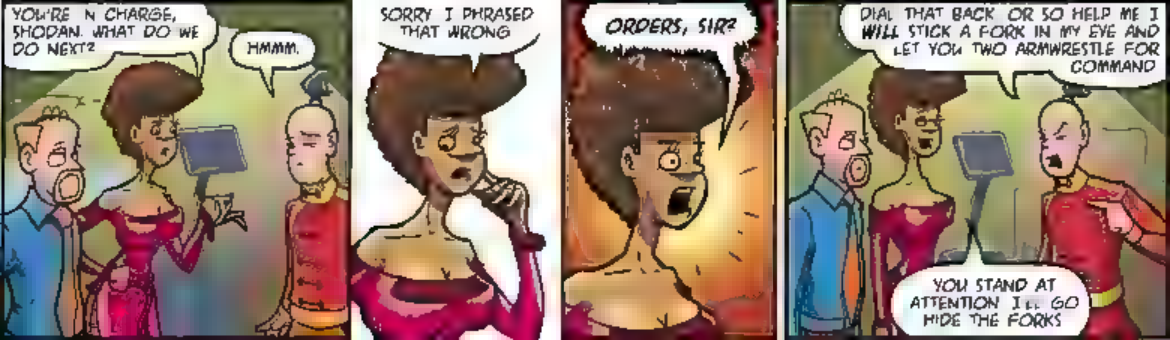

TEN MINUTES AFTER ON A DEPARTING SHUTTLE
OH YEAH A REALLY GOOD RUN
I TELL YOU THAT DUDE IN THE TUX HE WAS ON FIRE
YEAH, TELL THE CRASH-AND-BURN HE FACE PLANTED RIGHT THROUGH A DINETTE SET
SOFTMOLE SAYS THE SECURITY CAMERAS ALL WENT TO SLEEP RIGHT ON SCHEDULE
SO WE GOT AWAY CLEAN?
CLEAN? THIS ALIEN SALIVA SMELLS LIKE THE PASTE WE USED IN SCHOOL WHEN I WAS SIX.
IF YOU HADN'T BEEN SNIFFING PASTE BACK THEN YOU WOULDN'T BE BODY-CHECKING ALIENS FOR US NOW

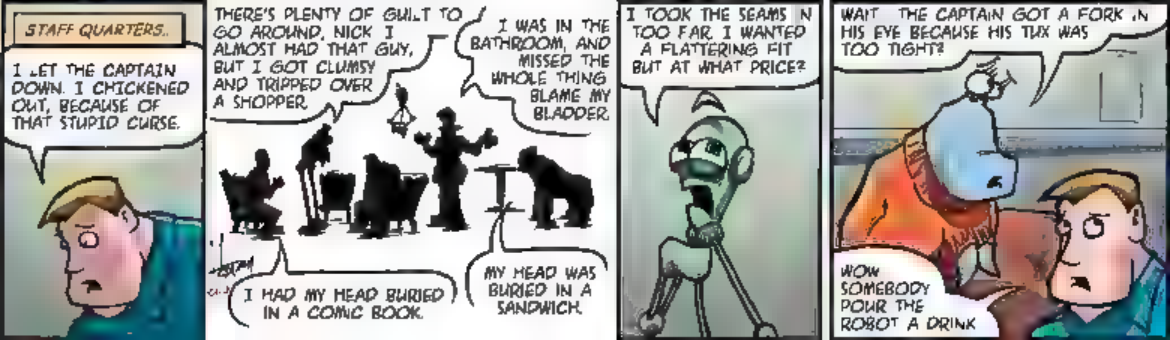

MAIL ONE EMERGENCY MEDICAL UNIT
DECK 20 95TH SOUTH AT THE 330TH
WHAT HAPPENED? HOW IS HE?
HE CRASHED THROUGH A RESTAURANT CHASING A NINJA SHOPLIFTER? I DON'T KNOW. BUT HE ENDED UP WITH A FORK IN HIS EYE TWO BROKEN RIBS, AND A DISLOCATED KNEE
I HAD TO TRANQUILIZE HIM TO PREVENT HIM FROM FURTHER INJURING HIMSELF
AND I'VE JUST NOW LEARNED THAT WITH THE EQUIPMENT HERE, I CANNOT CONFIDENTLY REPAIR THE CAPTAIN'S RIGHT EYE WHILE LETTING HIM USE THE LEFT

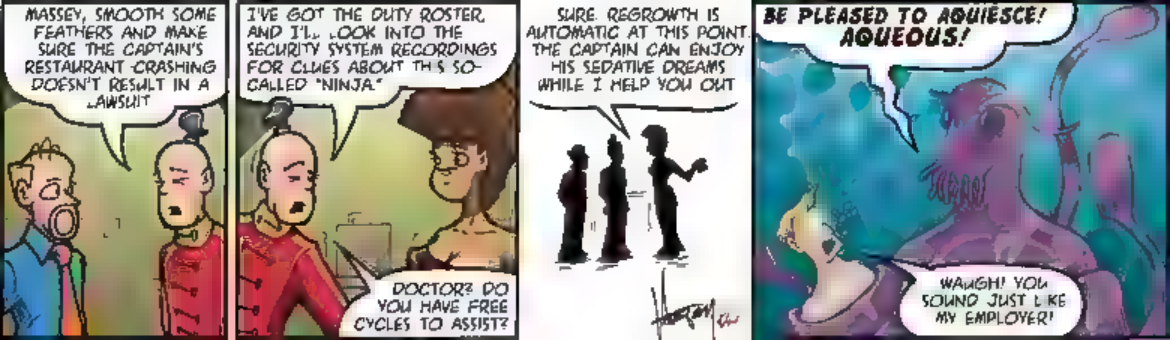

THIS RAISES AN IMPORTANT QUESTION
WHAT WILL TAGON DO WHEN HE AWAKENS, AND I TELL HIM HE HAS TO BE BLIND FOR TWO DAYS?
HE'LL TELL YOU TO REMOVE THE BAD EYE COMPLETELY HE'LL SETTLE FOR A ROGUISH EYE-PATCH UNTIL HE CAN SCHEDULE TWO DAYS OF CONVALESCENCE
AND THAT WON'T HAPPEN FOR ABOUT A YEAR
OKAY HOW LIKELY IS IT THAT A ROGUISHLY-PATCHED CAPTAIN TAGON WILL ATTEMPT MORE DECK-JUMPING IN SPITE OF HIS EXCITING, NEW MONOCULAR LACK OF DEPTH PERCEPTION?

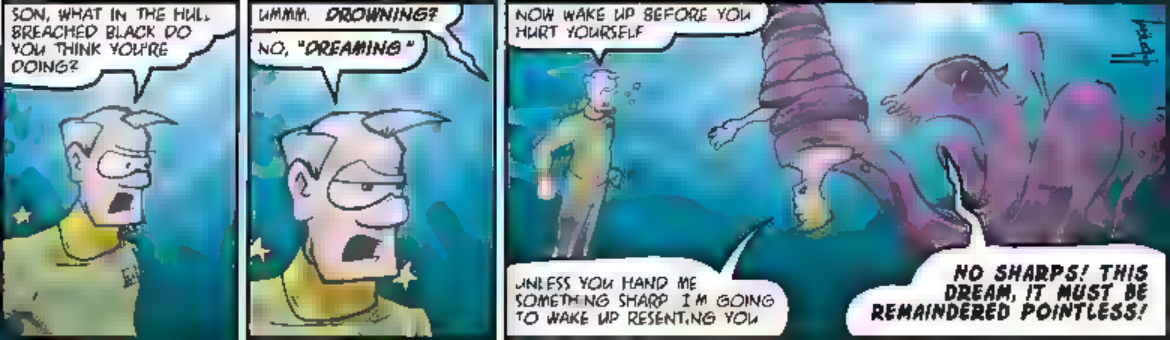

EXTREMELY LIKELY AND HE WON'T STOP UNTIL HE HURTS HIMSELF AGAIN
YOU'RE GOING TO NEED TO ASSIGN A CORPSMAN TO FOLLOW HIM AROUND FULL-TIME
THANK YOU. THAT'S ALL I NEED I'M GOING TO EXERCISE MY AUTHORITY AS DOCTOR AND KEEP THE CAPTAIN SEDATED UNTIL I'VE COMPLETED REPAIRS ON HIS EYE
YOU'RE NOW THE RANKING OFFICER LIEUTENANT COMMANDER SHODAN ENJOY THE NEXT TWO DAYS OF COMMAND
WHY DO I FEEL LIKE YOU SUCKERED ME INTO THIS?
BECAUSE THAT IS EXACTLY HOW THIS WENT DOWN

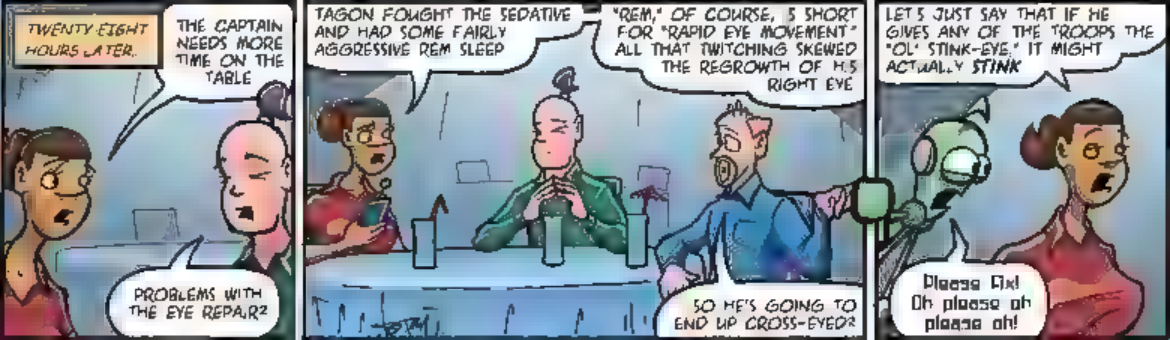

WAIT. IF I'M IN COMMAND NOW, I COULD ORDER YOU TO AWAKEN THE CAPTAIN.
MY MEDICAL AUTHORITY TAKES PRECEDENCE YOUR ORDER IS WITHOUT FORCE AND THE CAPTAIN REMAINS SEDATED
NOW YOU'RE TRYING TO SOUND LIKE A LAWYER, NOT A DOCTOR. LET'S GET MASSEY IN HERE TO SETTLE THIS.
THE DOCTOR IS RIGHT
BY LONGSTANDING MEDICAL TRADITION I CONSULTED WITH THE LAWYER FIRST

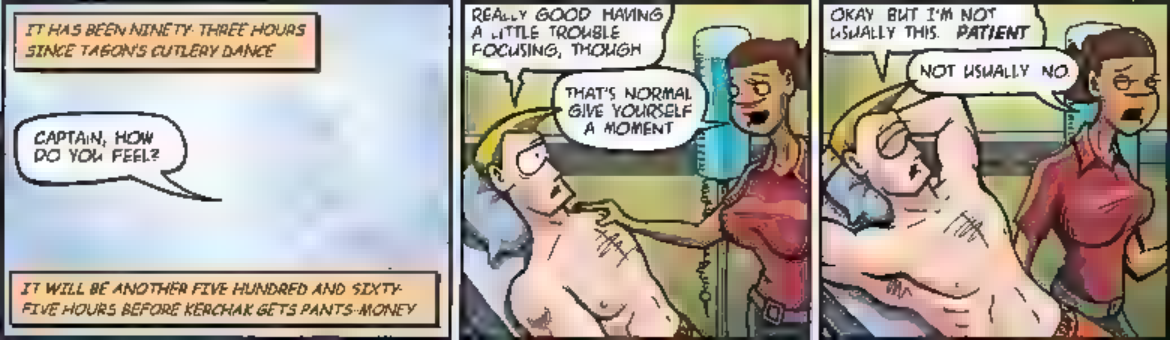

YOU'RE IN CHARGE, SHODAN. WHAT DO WE DO NEXT?
HMMM.
SORRY I PHRASED THAT WRONG
ORDERS, SIR?
DIAL THAT BACK OR SO HELP ME I WILL STICK A FORK IN MY EYE AND LET YOU TWO ARMWRESTLE FOR COMMAND
YOU STAND AT ATTENTION I'LL GO HIDE THE FORKS

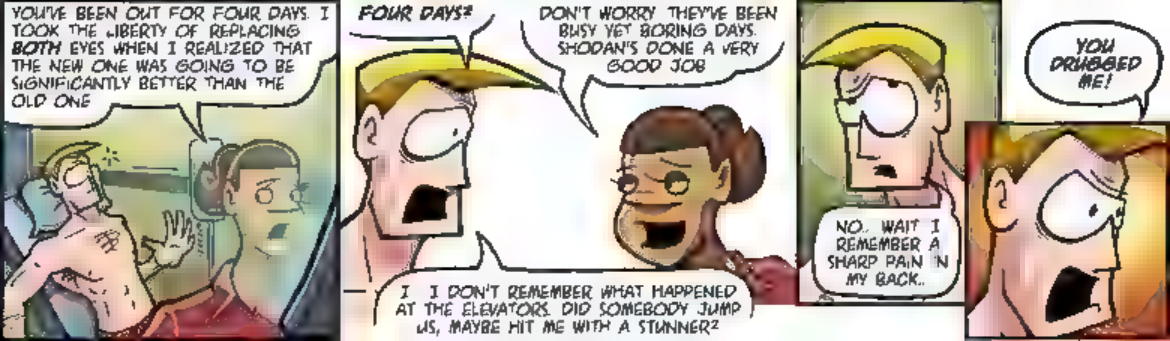

STAFF QUARTERS..
I LET THE CAPTAIN DOWN. I CHICKENED OUT, BECAUSE OF THAT STUPID CURSE.
THERE'S PLENTY OF GUILT TO GO AROUND, NICK I ALMOST HAD THAT GUY, BUT I GOT CLUMSY AND TRIPPED OVER A SHOPPER.
I WAS IN THE BATHROOM, AND MISSED THE WHOLE THING. BLAME MY BLADDER.
I HAD MY HEAD BURIED IN A COMIC BOOK.
MY HEAD WAS BURIED IN A SANDWICH.
I TOOK THE SEAMS TOO FAR. I WANTED A FLATTERING FIT BUT AT WHAT PRICE?
WAIT. THE CAPTAIN GOT A FORK IN HIS EYE BECAUSE HIS TUX WAS TOO TIGHT?
WOW SOMEBODY POUR THE ROBOT A DRINK

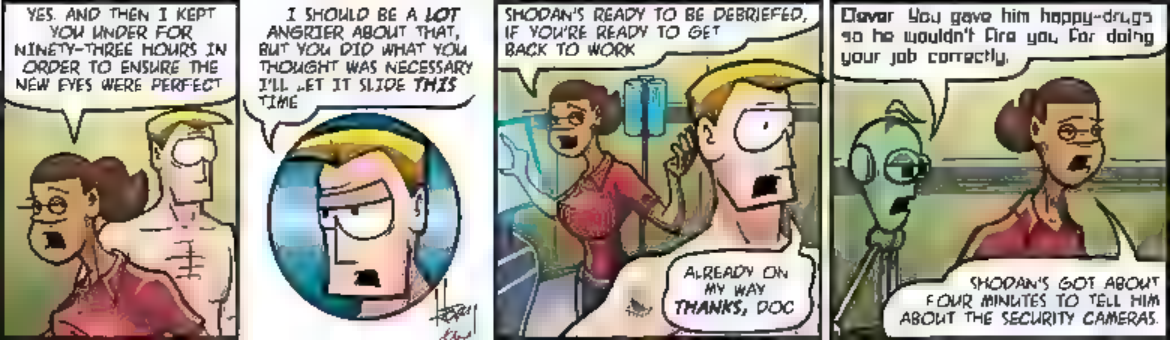

MASSEY, SMOOTH SOME FEATHERS AND MAKE SURE THE CAPTAIN'S RESTAURANT-CRASHING DOESN'T RESULT IN A LAWSUIT
I'VE GOT THE DUTY ROSTER AND I'LL LOOK INTO THE SECURITY SYSTEM RECORDINGS FOR CLUES ABOUT THIS SO-CALLED "NINJA."
DOCTOR? DO YOU HAVE FREE CYCLES TO ASSIST?
SURE. REGROWTH IS AUTOMATIC AT THIS POINT. THE CAPTAIN CAN ENJOY HIS SEDATIVE DREAMS WHILE I HELP YOU OUT
BE PLEASED TO AQUIESCE! AQUEOUS!
WAUGH! YOU SOUND JUST LIKE MY EMPLOYER!


SON, WHAT IN THE HULL BREACHED BLACK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?
UMMM. DROWNING?
NO, "DREAMING"
NOW WAKE UP BEFORE YOU HURT YOURSELF
UNLESS YOU HAND ME SOMETHING SHARP I'M GOING TO WAKE UP RESENTING YOU
NO SHARPS! THIS DREAM, IT MUST BE REMAINDERED POINTLESS!


TWENTY-EIGHT HOURS LATER.
THE CAPTAIN NEEDS MORE TIME ON THE TABLE
PROBLEMS WITH THE EYE REPAIR?
TAGON FOUGHT THE SEDATIVE AND HAD SOME FAIRLY AGGRESSIVE REM SLEEP
"REM," OF COURSE, IS SHORT FOR "RAPID EYE MOVEMENT." ALL THAT TWITCHING SKEWED THE REGROWTH OF HIS RIGHT EYE
SO HE'S GOING TO END UP CROSS-EYED?
LET'S JUST SAY THAT IF HE GIVES ANY OF THE TROOPS THE "OL' STINK-EYE," IT MIGHT ACTUALLY STINK
Please Dix! Oh please oh please oh!


IT HAS BEEN NINETY-THREE HOURS SINCE TAGON'S CUTLERY DANCE
CAPTAIN, HOW DO YOU FEEL?
IT WILL BE ANOTHER FIVE HUNDRED AND SIXTY-FIVE HOURS BEFORE KERCHAK GETS PANTS-MONEY
REALLY GOOD HAVING A LITTLE TROUBLE FOCUSING, THOUGH
THAT'S NORMAL GIVE YOURSELF A MOMENT
OKAY BUT I'M NOT USUALLY THIS. PATIENT
NOT USUALLY NO.

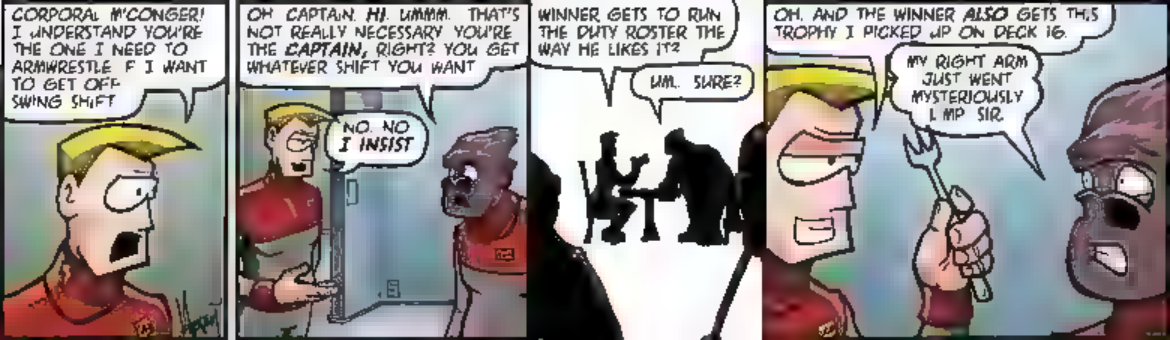

YOU'VE BEEN OUT FOR FOUR DAYS. I TOOK THE LIBERTY OF REPLACING BOTH EYES WHEN I REALIZED THAT THE NEW ONE WAS GOING TO BE SIGNIFICANTLY BETTER THAN THE OLD ONE
FOUR DAYS?
DON'T WORRY. THEY'VE BEEN BUSY YET BORING DAYS. SHODAN'S DONE A VERY GOOD JOB
I I DON'T REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED AT THE ELEVATORS. DID SOMEBODY JUMP US, MAYBE HIT ME WITH A STUNNER?
NO.. WAIT I REMEMBER A SHARP PAIN IN MY BACK..
YOU DRUBBED ME!


YES. AND THEN I KEPT YOU UNDER FOR NINETY-THREE HOURS IN ORDER TO ENSURE THE NEW EYES WERE PERFECT
I SHOULD BE A LOT ANGRIER ABOUT THAT, BUT YOU DID WHAT YOU THOUGHT WAS NECESSARY I'LL LET IT SLIDE THIS TIME
SHODAN'S READY TO BE DEBRIEFED, IF YOU'RE READY TO GET BACK TO WORK
ALREADY ON MY WAY THANKS, DOC
Clever. You gave him happy-drugs so he wouldn't fire you, for doing your job correctly.
SHODAN'S GOT ABOUT FOUR MINUTES TO TELL HIM ABOUT THE SECURITY CAMERAS.


SIX MINUTES LATER
NOTHING? NO RECORDINGS ANYWHERE? THIS IS RIDICULOUS!
AGREED BUT THERE IS AN UPSIDE TO HAVING ALL THE SECURITY CAMERAS COME UP BLANK ON THE EVENT, SIR
WELL? SPIT IT OUT!
NOBODY'S RE-WATCHING YOU USE THREE TABLES, SEVEN CHAIRS, AND A FORK TO BREAK YOUR FALL

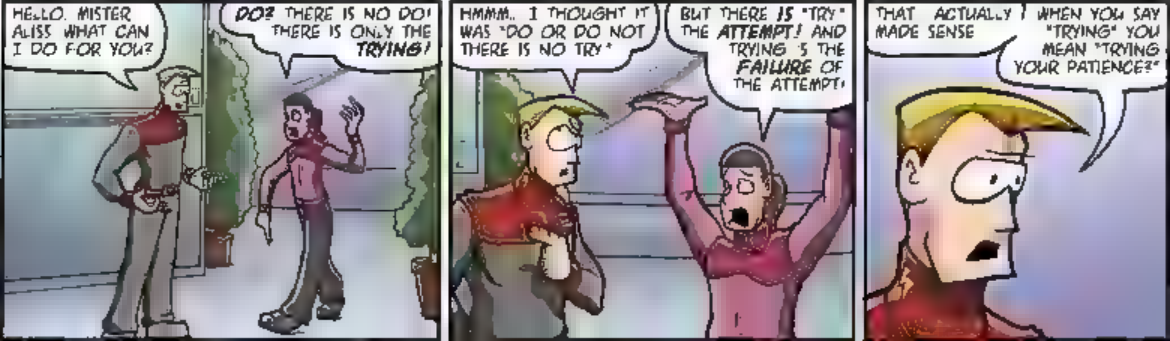

IS THAT OUR NEW MALL SECURITY UNIFORM YOU'RE WEARING?
TAILOR TELLS ME IT'S INSPIRED BY HISTORICAL FASHION AT MEL ONE, EXCEPT WITH PASSIVE FULLERENE WEAVE REINFORCED JOINTS AND A PIEZOPLATED TEN RING
BULLETPROOF AND SLASH-PROOF SMALL ARMS DO ALMOST NOTHING TO IT AND IT'LL TURN A KNIFE
IT'LL ALSO TURN A FORK, BUT YOU HAVE TO TAKE IT ON THE SLEEVE RATHER THAN IN THE EYE
I BET I CAN LIVE THAT DOWN AFTER I'VE TURNED IT TO MY ADVANTAGE.


THE DUTY ROSTER IS IN PLACE AND WE'VE ALREADY BEEN THROUGH TWO FULL THREE-SHIFT CYCLES.
HOW'S IT GOING?
AS WELL AS CAN BE EXPECTED
DO I NEED TO STEP IN AND FIX SOMETHING?
NOT UNLESS YOU WANT TO RIG AN ARMWRESTLING MATCH AGAINST A BOOSTED GORILLA.


CORPORAL M'CONGER! I UNDERSTAND YOU'RE THE ONE I NEED TO ARMWRESTLE IF I WANT TO GET OFF SWING SHIFT
OH CAPTAIN. HI. UMMM. THAT'S NOT REALLY NECESSARY YOU'RE THE CAPTAIN, RIGHT? YOU GET WHATEVER SHIFT YOU WANT
NO. NO I INSIST
WINNER GETS TO RUN THE DUTY ROSTER THE WAY HE LIKES IT?
UM. SURE?
OH. AND THE WINNER ALSO GETS THIS TROPHY I PICKED UP ON DECK 16.
MY RIGHT ARM JUST WENT MYSTERIOUSLY LIMP SIR.

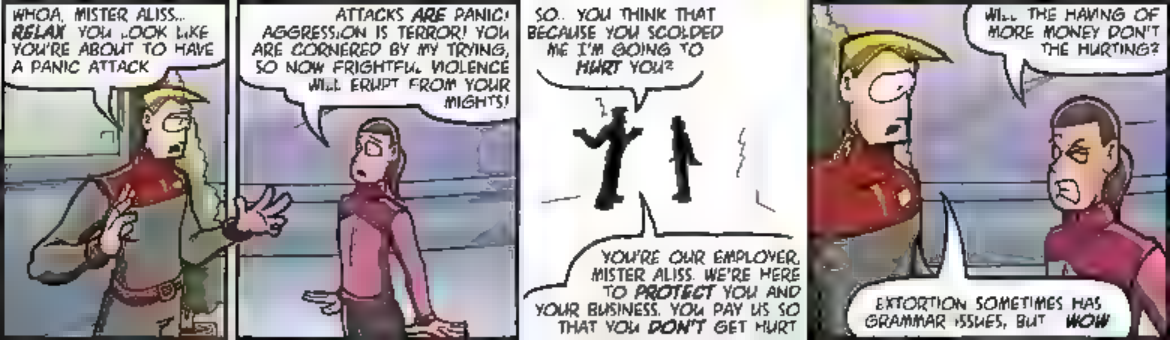

OKAY SHODAN. THE DUTY ROSTER IS BACK UNDER YOUR EXCLUSIVE CONTROL WHAT'S NEXT?
SIR?
YOU'VE BEEN RUNNING THINGS WELL. WHAT'S THE NEXT BIT WE NEED TO LOOK AT?
I... UMM. WAS HOPING THAT "THE NEXT BIT" WOULD BE THAT BIT WHERE YOU START GIVING ME ORDERS AGAIN.
OH. OKAY IF YOU INSIST.
I ORDER YOU TO KEEP RUNNING THINGS PRETEND I'VE STILL GOT A FORK IN MY FACE, IF THAT HELPS.


SIR, YOU DON'T HAVE A FORK IN YOUR FACE ANYMORE. WHAT SORT OF TASKS DO YOU WANT ME TO PASS TO YOU?
JUST GIVE ME THE OVERFLOW STUFF YOU CAN'T HANDLE LIKE THE ARMWRESTLING. THAT WAS A CHALLENGE
AH-HEY! YOUR CAPTAINCY IS STEREOPTIC AGAIN! THERE MUST BE WORDS! AND SHARING OF THEM!
AH-HEY! AN OVERFLOWING CHALLENGE! WITH IRONIC TIMELINESS!
KEEP THAT ACCENT UP AND I'LL OVERFLOW YOU WITH MY TROPHY FORK


HELLO. MISTER ALISS WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU?
DO? THERE IS NO DO! THERE IS ONLY THE TRYING!
HMMM.. I THOUGHT IT WAS "DO OR DO NOT THERE IS NO TRY."
BUT THERE IS "TRY" THE ATTEMPT! AND TRYING IS THE FAILURE OF THE ATTEMPT!
THAT ACTUALLY MADE SENSE
WHEN YOU SAY "TRYING" YOU MEAN "TRYING YOUR PATIENCE?"


YES! THE PATIENCE! ONLY NOT FOR THE WAITING. THE TRYING IS OF THE TOLERATING
SO.. YOU'RE UPSET BY MY CRASH-LANDING ON DECK 16.
YES. UPSET AS THE TABLES AND CHAIRS WERE UPSET AND THE DINERS! MUCH WAS UPSET AND THAT WAS VERY TRYING
YOU KNOW, I HAD THE WEIRDEST DREAM WHILE I WAS UNDER.
THIS PERTAINS? WITH CONCOMITANCE?


THE DREAM REMINDED ME THAT I'VE HEARD YOUR FUNNY ACCENT BEFORE
THERE'S A CASTE OF HUMAN DIPLOMATS ON CELESCHUL RAISED AMONG THE SCHULL NATIVES, THEY GROW UP UNDERWATER SPEAKING GALSTANDARD PEROXIDE.
WHEN THEY GET AROUND TO TALKING PROPER, AIR-BREATHING, GALSTANDARD WEST THEY SOUND PRETTY MUCH LIKE YOU DO.
THEY CALL THEMSELVES "AQUEOUSC," BUT WE CALLED 'EM DIPLOBRATS.
SO WHAT'S A SCHULL SYMPATHIZING, SON-OF-A-DIPLOMAT DOING THIS FAR OUT OF WATER? OR ARE YOU IN WATER OVER YOUR HEAD?
OH TRYING. NOW THERE'S ONLY DONE AND UNDONE


WHOA, MISTER ALISS.. RELAX YOU LOOK LIKE YOU'RE ABOUT TO HAVE A PANIC ATTACK
ATTACKS ARE PANIC! AGGRESSION IS TERROR! YOU ARE CORNERED BY MY TRYING, SO NOW FRIGHTFUL VIOLENCE WILL ERUPT FROM YOUR MIGHTS!
SO.. YOU THINK THAT BECAUSE YOU SCOLDED ME I'M GOING TO HURT YOU?
YOU'RE OUR EMPLOYER, MISTER ALISS. WE'RE HERE TO PROTECT YOU AND YOUR BUSINESS. YOU PAY US SO THAT YOU DON'T GET HURT
WILL THE HAVING OF MORE MONEY DON'T THE HURTING?
EXTORTION SOMETIMES HAS GRAMMAR ISSUES, BUT WOW

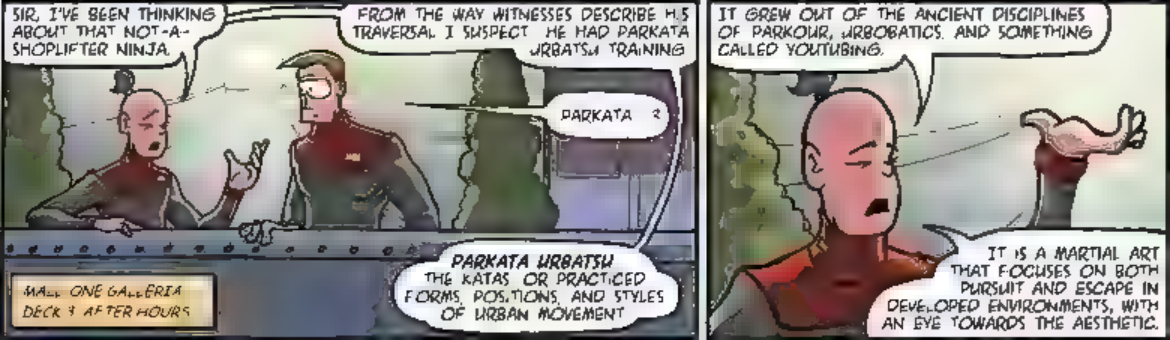

I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M SAYING THIS, BUT I DON'T WANT MORE MONEY
I JUST WANT MY TEAM TO BE ABLE TO DO THE JOB HERE
TAKE THAT NINJA GUY WE NEED TO BE ABLE TO PURSUE AND APPREHEND WITHOUT WORRYING ABOUT HURTING YOUR FEELINGS.
WE WON'T BE HURTING BYSTANDERS, DAMAGING MERCHANDISE, OR DENTING THE HISTORIC BULKHEADS. PLEASE, JUST LET US DO OUR JOBS, OKAY?
BUT IF IT MAKES YOU FEEL BETTER, YOU CAN BUY UNLIMITED "YELL AT THE CAPTAIN" RIGHTS FOR AN ADDITIONAL TWENTY PERCENT
IS NOT THAT THE MORE MONEY YOU SAID YOU DO NOT WANT?
THAT WAS CRAZY TALK I'M NOT SURE WHAT CAME OVER ME


CAPTAIN, HOW DID YOU DO THAT?
I'M REALLY NOT SURE
I THOUGHT I WAS NEGOTIATING FOR MORE FREEDOM TO OPERATE
SUDDENLY IT HIT ME... MISTER ALISS WOULDN'T FEEL SECURE UNLESS I LET HIM GIVE US MORE MONEY
GOOD JOB, TRUSTING YOUR INSTINCTS LIKE THAT, CAPTAIN.
FOR JUST A MOMENT I I DIDN'T WANT TO ASK FOR MORE MONEY
I THINK I'M STILL ON DRUGS

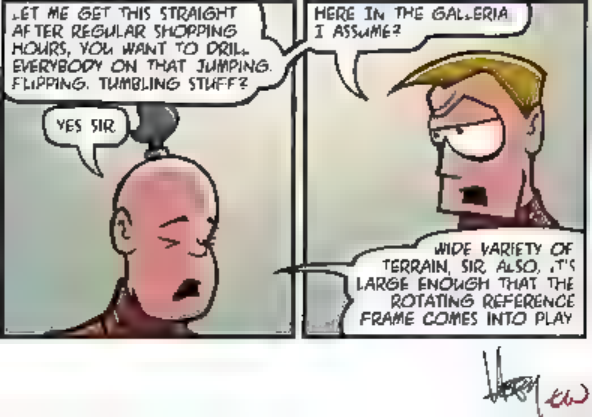

ANYWAY, THAT WAS GOOD NEGOTIATING. YOU GOT EVERYTHING YOU WANTED JUST BY ASKING ABOUT OUR EMPLOYER'S BACKGROUND
DID YOU SEE HOW HARD HE PANICKED WHEN I ASKED HIM ABOUT THE SCHWUL?
I HAD HIM TOTALLY OUTGUNNED
HE NEVER ANSWERED MY QUESTION
OUTGUNNED, TOTALLY

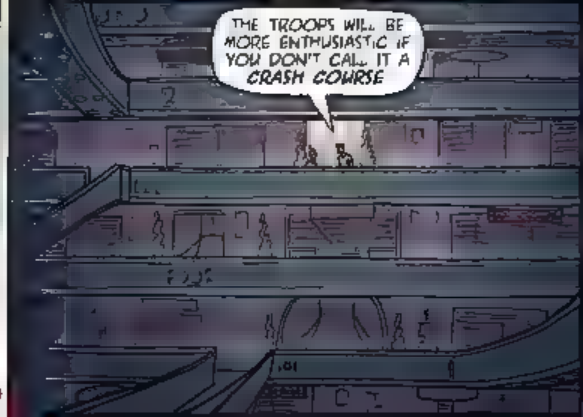

HELLO, SIRS. TODAY, IN MY ONGOING SEARCH FOR INFORMATION ABOUT OUR NINJA INTERLOPER, I LEARNED A NEW WORD
YOU? YOU'VE GOT A LAWYER VOCABULARY ALREADY
I MEAN IT'S LIKE A PLETHORA...
PLETHAURUS?
OF YOU KNOW WORDS
GOOD JOB ANOTHER SENTENCE SLAIN, SIR
PLETHAURUS OKAY TODAY I LEARNED TWO NEW WORDS.


THE WORD 'S "SHRINKAGE." IT'S WHEN A RETAILER'S INVENTORY IS SHRINKING BECAUSE OF SHOPLIFTING OR OTHER THEFT
I LEARNED THE WORD BECAUSE SHRINKAGE HASN'T BEEN A PROBLEM HERE.
HE MAY HAVE BEEN RUNNING LIKE HE STOLE SOMETHING, BUT OUR NINJA FRIEND WASN'T A SHOPLIFTER.
MAYBE HE WAS A PURSE-SNATCHER?
UNLIKELY THE FIRST PERSON TO CHASE HIM WAS YOU, AND YOU STILL HAD YOUR WALLET
THE ONLY THING THAT GOT TAKEN WAS A FORK, AND YOU TOOK THAT
THE MAITRE'D DECIDED YOU COULD KEEP IT, WITH HIS COMPLIMENTS.


SIR, I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT THAT NOT-A-SHOPLIFTER NINJA.
FROM THE WAY WITNESSES DESCRIBE HIS TRAVERSAL I SUSPECT HE HAD PARKATA URBATSU TRAINING
PARKATA ?
MALL ONE GALLERIA DECK 9 AFTER HOURS
PARKATA URBATSU THE KATAS OR PRACTICED FORMS, POSITIONS, AND STYLES OF URBAN MOVEMENT
IT GREW OUT OF THE ANCIENT DISCIPLINES OF PARKOUR, URBOBATICS, AND SOMETHING CALLED YOUTUBING.
IT IS A MARTIAL ART THAT FOCUSES ON BOTH PURSUIT AND ESCAPE IN DEVELOPED ENVIRONMENTS, WITH AN EYE TOWARDS THE AESTHETIC.


WHETHER YOU PLAY THE PURSUER OR THE PURSUED YOUR GOAL IS NOT JUST THE COMPLETION OF THE CHASE
YOUR GOAL IS TO HAVE YOUR OPPONENTS AND ANY BYSTANDERS STOP IN AWE AS THEY ASK THEMSELVES "HOW DID HE DO THAT?"
OKAY, HE HAD FLASHY MARTIAL ARTS TRAINING. SO?
SO.. I THINK THAT IN ORDER TO CATCH THIS GUY WE NEED TO THINK LIKE HIM I WANT PERMISSION TO GIVE THE TROOPS A CRASH COURSE IN PARKATA URBATSU.

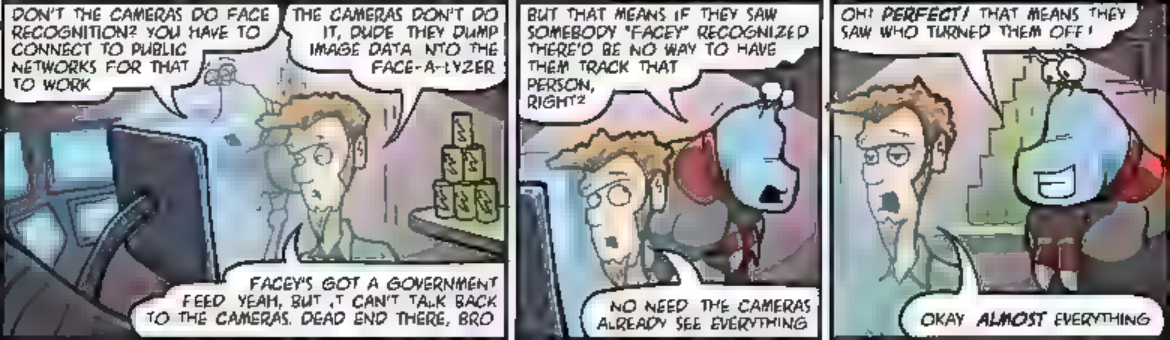

LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT AFTER REGULAR SHOPPING HOURS, YOU WANT TO DRILL EVERYBODY ON THAT JUMPING. FLIPPING. TUMBLING STUFF?
YES SIR.
HERE IN THE GALLERIA I ASSUME?
WIDE VARIETY OF TERRAIN, SIR. ALSO, IT'S LARGE ENOUGH THAT THE ROTATING REFERENCE FRAME COMES INTO PLAY


THE TROOPS WILL BE MORE ENTHUSIASTIC IF YOU DON'T CALL IT A CRASH COURSE

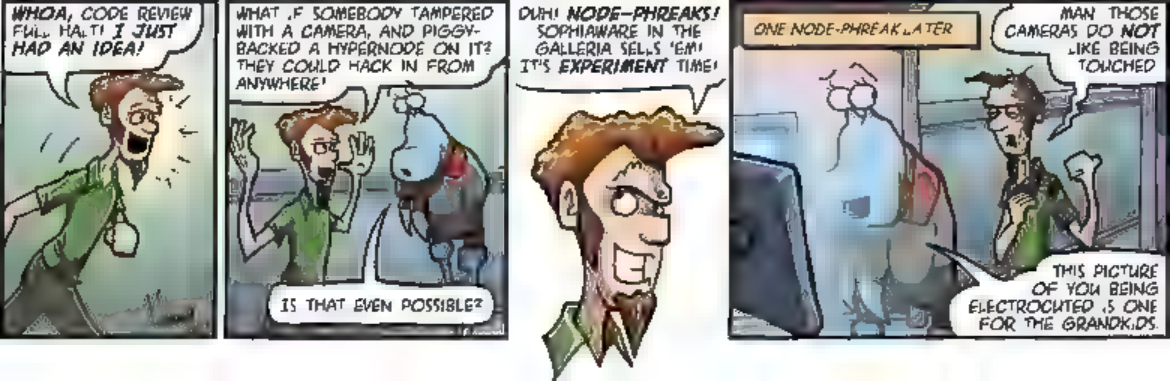

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER SHODAN. YEARS AGO WHEN YOU ENLISTED YOU ASKED FOR A JOB AS A MARTIAL ARTS TRAINER.
AND HERE YOU ARE, TRYING TO SOLVE OUR CURRENT PROBLEM WITH MARTIAL ARTS TRAINING.
HOW'S THAT SAYING GO? "WHEN YOU'RE ARMED WITH A HAMMER, ALL YOUR ENEMIES BECOME NAILS?"
SIR. YOU'RE RIGHT I'M BEING NARROW-MINDED
NO, NO. PLEASE CONTINUE. I BET MARTIAL ARTS TRAINING IS A REALLY, REALLY USEFUL HAMMER.

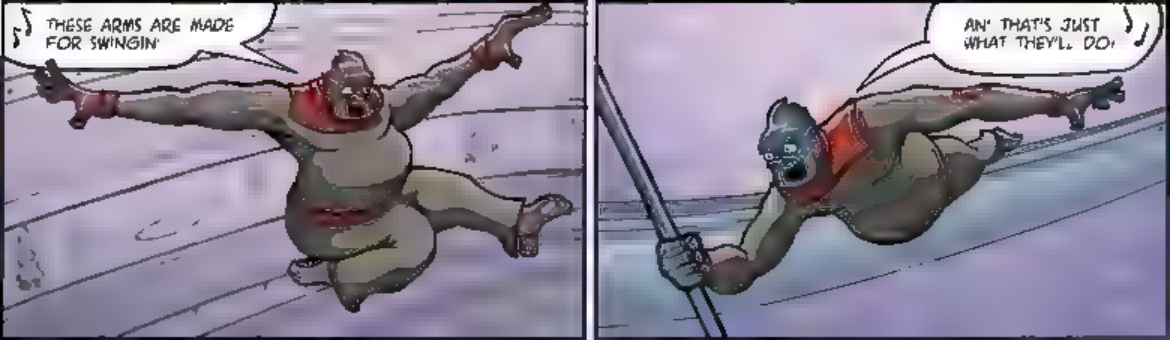

DUDE, I GOTTA TELL YOU. I'M JUST GONNA TELL YOU WHAT I TOLD YOUR BOSS.
THAT'S FINE, MISTER MALANTHYUS. I'M HERE TO TELL YOU THAT HE TOLD ME TO TELL YOU TO TELL ME ABOUT IT
MALL ONE SECURITY DATA CENTER
I.. WAIT, WHAT?
I'M IN THE MILITARY "DUDE." I KNOW ALL ABOUT POINTLESS REPETITION
ALSO I'VE GOT A PREHENSILE TONGUE SO I'M PROBABLY BETTER AT TONGUE-TWISTERS THAN YOU ARE


THE SECURITY CAMERAS ARE NETWORKED OBVIOUSLY, BUT THERE ARE NO OUTSIDE CONNECTIONS.
NO HYPERNODES. NO INFRATALK. NO FREEGYCHAT NOTHIN' THEY TALK TO THEIR CONTROL BOX, AND THAT'S IT
THE ONLY WAY TO TELL ALL THE CAMERAS SOMETHING IS TO DO IT FROM THIS TERMINAL RIGHT HERE, AND ONLY MAYBE SIX OF US HAVE KEYS TO GET AT IT
SO IF ALL THE CAMERAS WENT TO SLEEP DURING, SAY, THE COMMISSION OF A CRIME, WE WOULD HAVE MAYBE SIX SUSPECTS TO CONSIDER.
OH YEAH. I GUESS SO
BUT NOT YOU OF COURSE, BECAUSE YOU'RE BEING SO HELPFUL.


DON'T THE CAMERAS DO FACE RECOGNITION? YOU HAVE TO CONNECT TO PUBLIC NETWORKS FOR THAT TO WORK
THE CAMERAS DON'T DO IT, DUDE THEY DUMP IMAGE DATA INTO THE FACE-A-LYZER
FACEY'S GOT A GOVERNMENT FEED YEAH, BUT IT CAN'T TALK BACK TO THE CAMERAS. DEAD END THERE, BRO
BUT THAT MEANS IF THEY SAW SOMEBODY "FACEY" RECOGNIZED THERE'D BE NO WAY TO HAVE THEM TRACK THAT PERSON, RIGHT?
NO NEED THE CAMERAS ALREADY SEE EVERYTHING
OH! PERFECT! THAT MEANS THEY SAW WHO TURNED THEM OFF!
OKAY ALMOST EVERYTHING

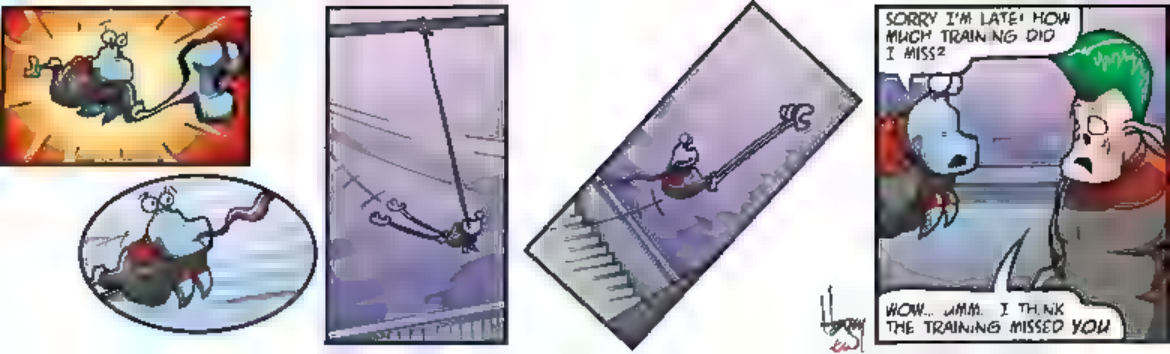

LET ME PUT IT THIS WAY. IF THE ONLY WAY TO TELL THE CAMERAS TO STOP RECORDING S TO DO IT FROM THIS ROOM, YOU HAVE A PROBLEM
THE EASIEST WAY FOR US TO REGAIN CONTROL OF OUR SECURITY IS TO JUST FIRE EVERYBODY WITH ACCESS TO THIS ROOM
BUT THIS IS A GREAT JOB. I LOVE THIS JOB.
THEN START REVIEWING THE CAMERA SOFTWARE FOR BACK DOORS
MILLIONS OF BLOCKS OF CODE.. STILL, IT'S EASIER THAN WRITING A DECENT RESUME


WHOA, CODE REVIEW FULL HALT! I JUST HAD AN IDEA!
WHAT IF SOMEBODY TAMPERED WITH A CAMERA, AND PIGGY-BACKED A HYPERNODE ON IT? THEY COULD HACK IN FROM ANYWHERE!
IS THAT EVEN POSSIBLE?
DUH! NODE-PHREAKS! SOPHIAWARE IN THE GALLERIA SELLS 'EM! IT'S EXPERIMENT TIME!
ONE NODE-PHREAK LATER
MAN THOSE CAMERAS DO NOT LIKE BEING TOUCHED
THIS PICTURE OF YOU BEING ELECTROCUTED IS ONE FOR THE GRANDKIDS.

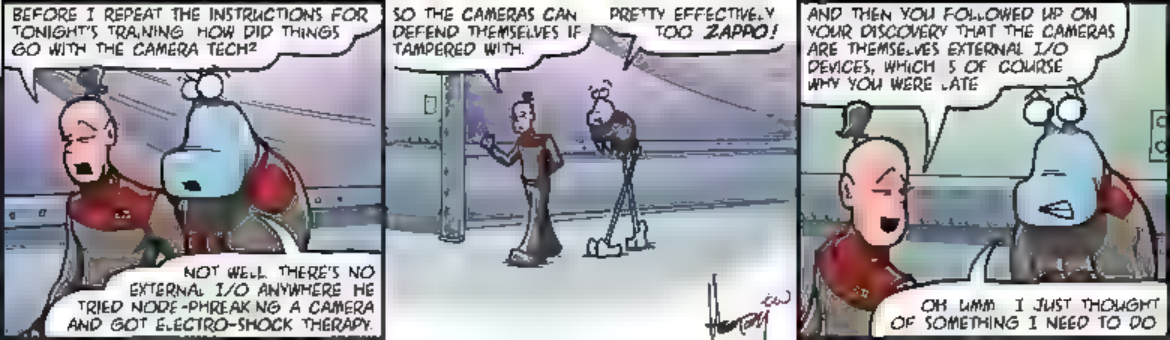

THESE ARMS ARE MADE FOR SWINGIN'
AN' THAT'S JUST WHAT THEY'LL DO!

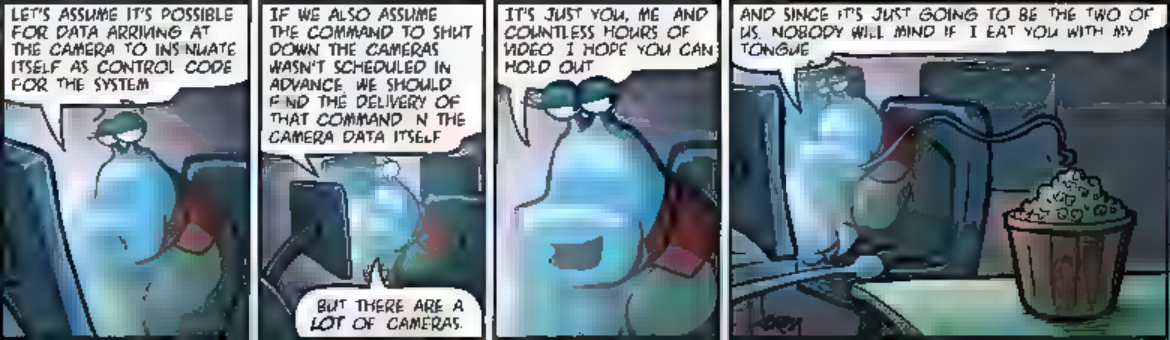

ONE O' THESE DAYS THESE ARMS'LL SWING
PARKATA URBATSU!

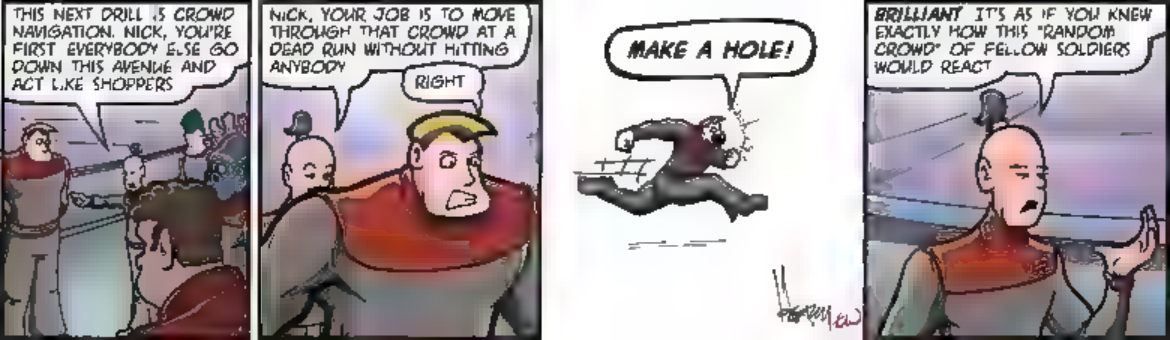

MORE PRACTICE LESS THEME MUSIC

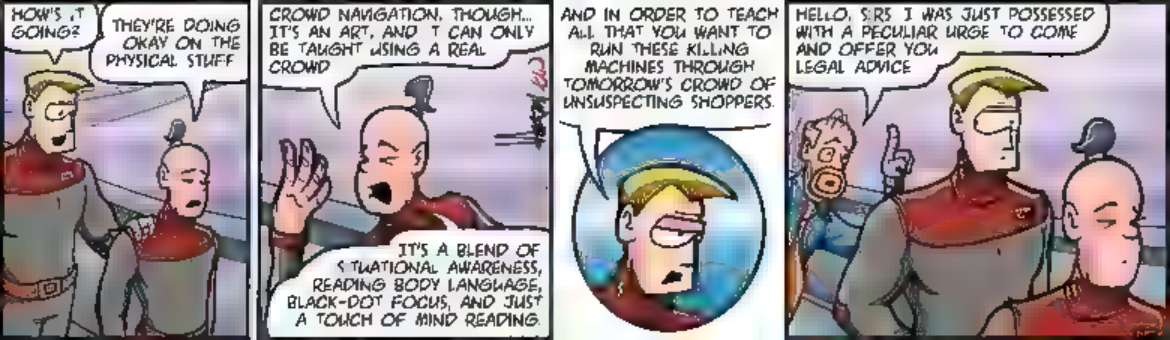

SORRY I'M LATE! HOW MUCH TRAINING DID I MISS?
WOW... UMM. I THINK THE TRAINING MISSED YOU

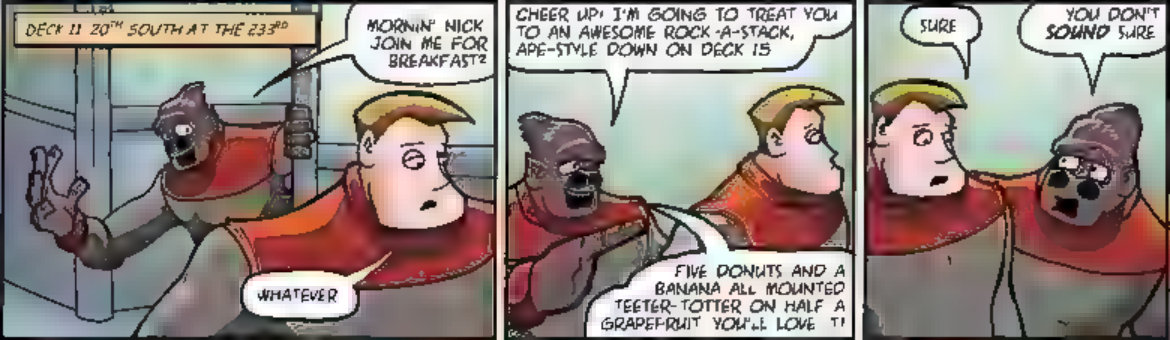

LEGS, I THINK THAT ANDY IS TRYING TO TELL YOU THAT YOU HAVE MASTERED THE IRONIC ENTRANCE
THESE BRUISED, CLUMSY STUDENTS OF PARKATA URBATSU WERE TAKING A FEW MINUTES TO METAPHORICALLY LICK THEIR WOUNDS.
IN YOUR RUSH TO GET HERE, YOU PERFORMED A FIFTH-DAN TRAVERSE AND LITERALLY SWUNG ONTO THIS DECK USING YOUR TONGUE
POINTS FOR STYLE?
POINTS? I SHOULD BE AWARDING INSTRUCTOR CERTIFICATION


BEFORE I REPEAT THE INSTRUCTIONS FOR TONIGHT'S TRAINING HOW DID THINGS GO WITH THE CAMERA TECH?
NOT WELL. THERE'S NO EXTERNAL I/O ANYWHERE HE TRIED NODE-PHREAKING A CAMERA AND GOT ELECTRO-SHOCK THERAPY.
SO THE CAMERAS CAN DEFEND THEMSELVES IF TAMPERED WITH.
PRETTY EFFECTIVELY TOO ZAPPO!
AND THEN YOU FOLLOWED UP ON YOUR DISCOVERY THAT THE CAMERAS ARE THEMSELVES EXTERNAL I/O DEVICES, WHICH IS OF COURSE WHY YOU WERE LATE
OH UMM I JUST THOUGHT OF SOMETHING I NEED TO DO


LET'S ASSUME IT'S POSSIBLE FOR DATA ARRIVING AT THE CAMERA TO INSINUATE ITSELF AS CONTROL CODE FOR THE SYSTEM
IF WE ALSO ASSUME THE COMMAND TO SHUT DOWN THE CAMERAS WASN'T SCHEDULED IN ADVANCE, WE SHOULD FIND THE DELIVERY OF THAT COMMAND IN THE CAMERA DATA ITSELF
BUT THERE ARE A LOT OF CAMERAS.
IT'S JUST YOU, ME AND COUNTLESS HOURS OF VIDEO I HOPE YOU CAN HOLD OUT
AND SINCE IT'S JUST GOING TO BE THE TWO OF US, NOBODY WILL MIND IF I EAT YOU WITH MY TONGUE


THIS NEXT DRILL IS CROWD NAVIGATION. NICK, YOU'RE FIRST. EVERYBODY ELSE GO DOWN THIS AVENUE AND ACT LIKE SHOPPERS
NICK, YOUR JOB IS TO MOVE THROUGH THAT CROWD AT A DEAD RUN WITHOUT HITTING ANYBODY
RIGHT
MAKE A HOLE!
BRILLIANT IT'S AS IF YOU KNEW EXACTLY HOW THIS "RANDOM CROWD" OF FELLOW SOLDIERS WOULD REACT

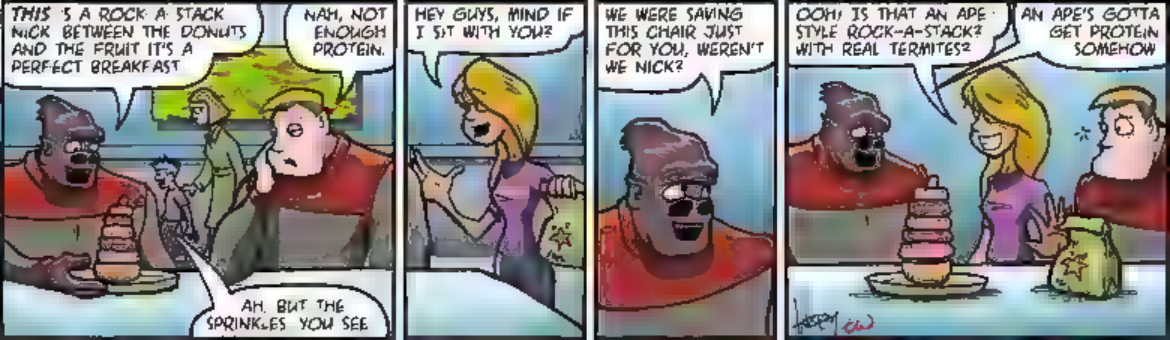

HOW'S IT GOING?
THEY'RE DOING OKAY ON THE PHYSICAL STUFF
CROWD NAVIGATION, THOUGH... IT'S AN ART, AND I CAN ONLY BE TAUGHT USING A REAL CROWD
IT'S A BLEND OF SITUATIONAL AWARENESS, READING BODY LANGUAGE, BLACK-DOT FOCUS, AND JUST A TOUCH OF MIND READING.
AND IN ORDER TO TEACH ALL THAT YOU WANT TO RUN THESE KILLING MACHINES THROUGH TOMORROW'S CROWD OF UNSUSPECTING SHOPPERS.
HELLO, SIR! I WAS JUST POSSESSED WITH A PECULIAR URGE TO COME AND OFFER YOU LEGAL ADVICE

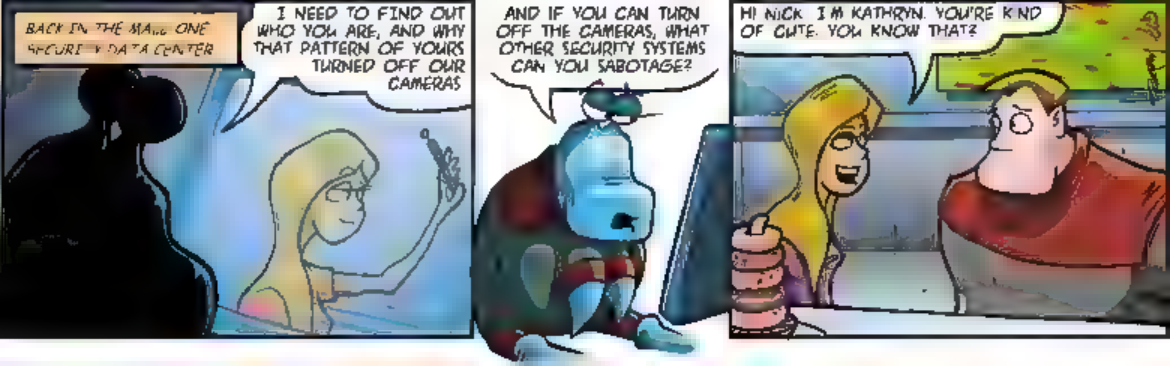

DECK 11 20TH SOUTH AT THE 233RD
MORNIN' NICK JOIN ME FOR BREAKFAST?
WHATEVER
CHEER UP! I'M GOING TO TREAT YOU TO AN AWESOME ROCK-A-STACK, APE-STYLE DOWN ON DECK 15
FIVE DONUTS AND A BANANA ALL MOUNTED TEETER-TOTTER ON HALF A GRAPEFRUIT YOU'LL LOVE IT
SURE
YOU DON'T SOUND SURE

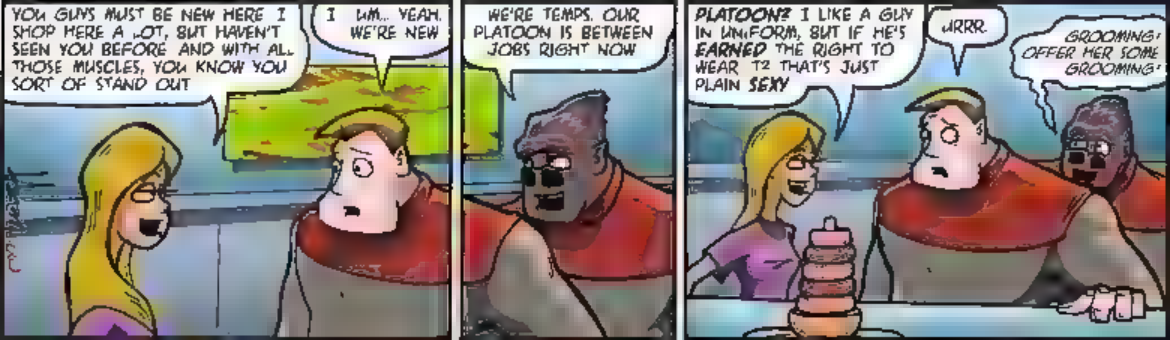

I SPENT ALL NIGHT DREAMIN' BOUT FALLING
AN' IT WAS A SHORT NIGHT ANYWAY, CAUSE O' SHODAN DRILLING US ON THAT PARKY BATSO STUFF
FOR ALL THE GOOD IT'LL DO I'M STILL UNDER ELF'S KISSING CURSE I NEED TO BE DREAMIN 'BOUT GIRLS AND KISSIN 'EM. I GOTTA GET MOTIVATED
NICK YOU'VE GOT ISSUES. STOP WORRYING JUST ASK SOMEBODY OUT AND LET NATURE DO THE REST


NATURE? IT'S NOT THAT EASY M'CONGER
SURE IT S LEMME GIVE YOU A TRICK I LEARNED FROM FIFTY THOUSAND YEARS OF EVOLUTION
HALFWAY THROUGH THE MEAL YOU GAZE LONGINGLY AT HER HAIR, AND THEN REACH ACROSS THE TABLE TO TOUCH T GENTLY
THEN YOU FAKE PICK N OUT A N T AND YOU POP IT IN YOUR MOUTH
"FORGET DINNER, MY DEAR, I WANT TO EAT IN TONIGHT"
IT'S ROMANTIC FOR YOU TO EAT BUGS OUT OF EACH OTHERS HAIR²
HEY DON'T LOOK AT ME LIKE IT'S MY FAULT THE UPLIFT CONGRESS LEFT THAT BIT N.

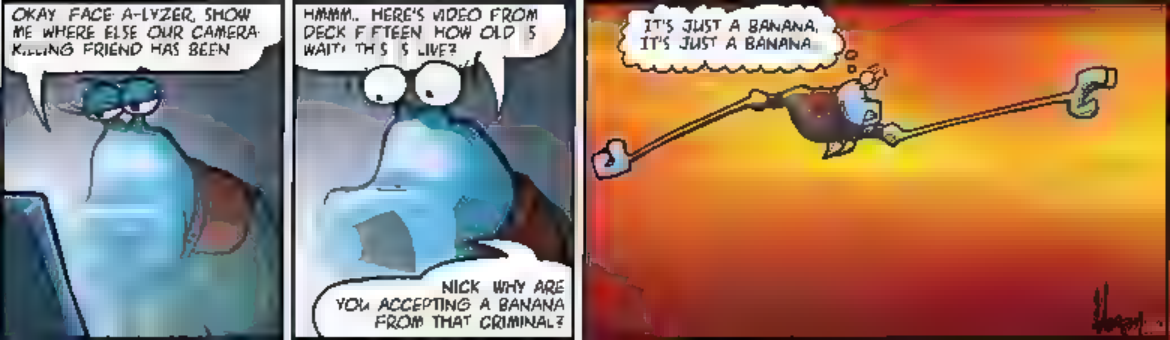

DECK 5 20TH NORTH AT THE 15TH THE MALL ONE SECURITY DATA CENTER
WELL. THAT'S WEIRD
LET'S SEE AN INSTANT REPLAY IN SLOW MO
HMPH. I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU DID THAT LADY
BUT I RECOGNIZE YOU. AND YOUR ELBOWS. AND YOUR SHOPPING BAG. I EVEN REMEMBER WHAT YOUR SHAMPOO BOTTLE TASTED LIKE
BETRAYAL, WITH A SNEAKY DASH OF INNOCENCE

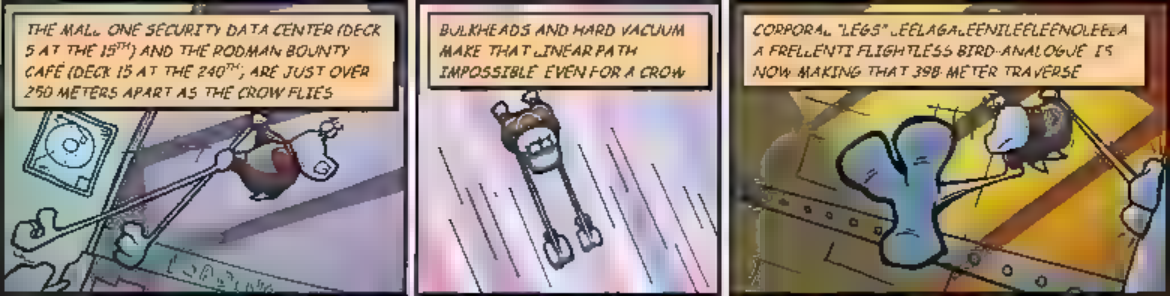

THIS IS A ROCK A STACK NICK BETWEEN THE DONUTS AND THE FRUIT IT'S A PERFECT BREAKFAST
NAH, NOT ENOUGH PROTEIN.
AH, BUT THE SPRINKLES YOU SEE
HEY GUYS, MIND IF I SIT WITH YOU?
WE WERE SAVING THIS CHAIR JUST FOR YOU, WEREN'T WE NICK?
OOH! IS THAT AN APE STYLE ROCK-A-STACK? WITH REAL TERMITES?
AN APE'S GOTTA GET PROTEIN SOMEHOW

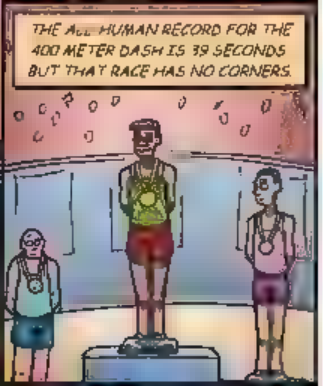

BACK IN THE MALL ONE
SECURITY DATA CENTER
I NEED TO FIND OUT WHO YOU ARE, AND WHY THAT PATTERN OF YOURS TURNED OFF OUR CAMERAS
AND IF YOU CAN TURN OFF THE CAMERAS, WHAT OTHER SECURITY SYSTEMS CAN YOU SABOTAGE?
HI NICK. I'M KATHRYN. YOU'RE KIND OF CUTE. YOU KNOW THAT?


YOU GUYS MUST BE NEW HERE I SHOP HERE A LOT, BUT HAVEN'T SEEN YOU BEFORE AND WITH ALL THOSE MUSCLES, YOU KNOW YOU SORT OF STAND OUT
I UM... YEAH. WE'RE NEW
WE'RE TEMPS. OUR PLATOON IS BETWEEN JOBS RIGHT NOW
PLATOON? I LIKE A GUY IN UNIFORM, BUT IF HE'S EARNED THE RIGHT TO WEAR IT THAT'S JUST PLAIN SEXY
URRR
GROOMING! OFFER HER SOME GROOMING!


OH, GEEZ. KATHRYN HOLD STILL!
LOOKS LIKE ONE O' M'CONGER'S BREAKFAST TERMITES GOT IN YOUR HAIR. GROSS
DON'T LOOK AT ME NICK YOU GROOMED HER, YOU GET TO EAT THE BUG
IF I EAT IT THINGS START TO GET A LITTLE KINKY

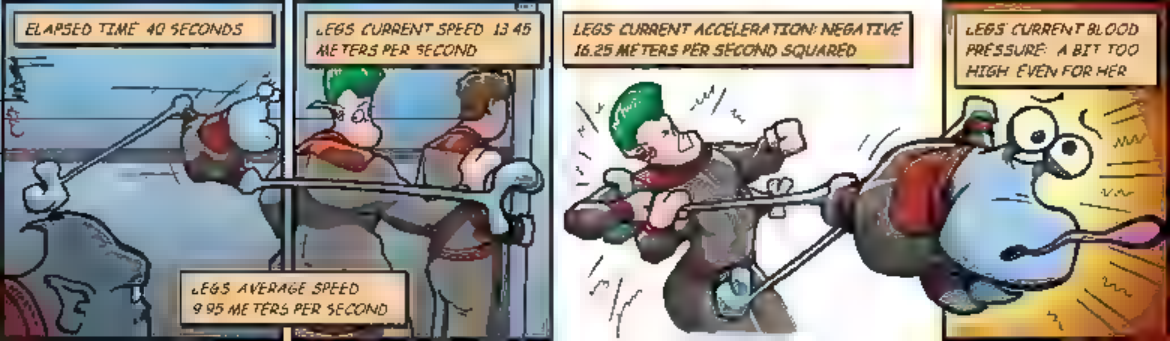

OKAY FACE A-LYZER, SHOW ME WHERE ELSE OUR CAMERA-KILLING FRIEND HAS BEEN
HMMM.. HERE'S VIDEO FROM DECK FIFTEEN HOW OLD IS WAIT! THIS IS LIVE?
NICK WHY ARE YOU ACCEPTING A BANANA FROM THAT CRIMINAL?
IT'S JUST A BANANA. IT'S JUST A BANANA...


THE MALL ONE SECURITY DATA CENTER (DECK 5 AT THE 15TH) AND THE RODMAN BOUNTY CAFÉ (DECK 15 AT THE 240TH; ARE JUST OVER 250 METERS APART AS THE CROW FLIES
BULKHEADS AND HARD VACUUM MAKE THAT LINEAR PATH IMPOSSIBLE EVEN FOR A CROW
CORPORAL "LEGS" LEELAGALEENILEELEENOLEELA A FRELLENTI FLIGHTLESS BIRD-ANALOGUE IS NOW MAKING THAT 398-METER TRAVERSE

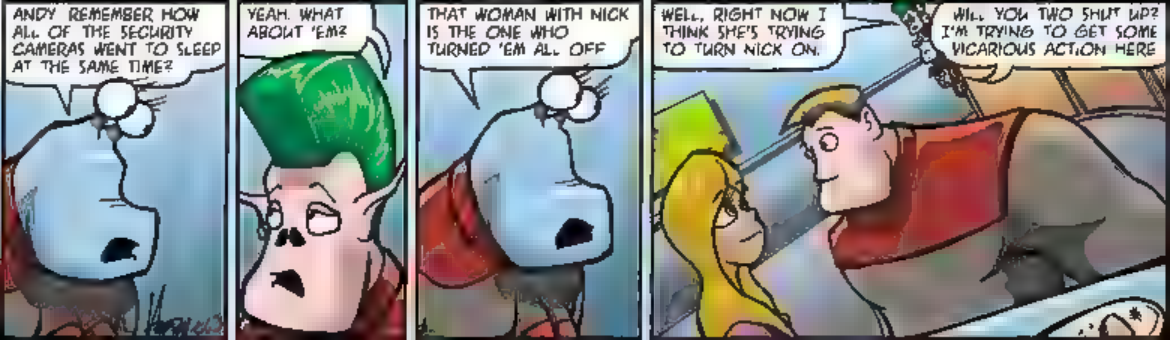

THE ALL HUMAN RECORD FOR THE 400 METER DASH IS 39 SECONDS. BUT THAT RACE HAS NO CORNERS.


OF COURSE LEGS IS NOT HUMAN.

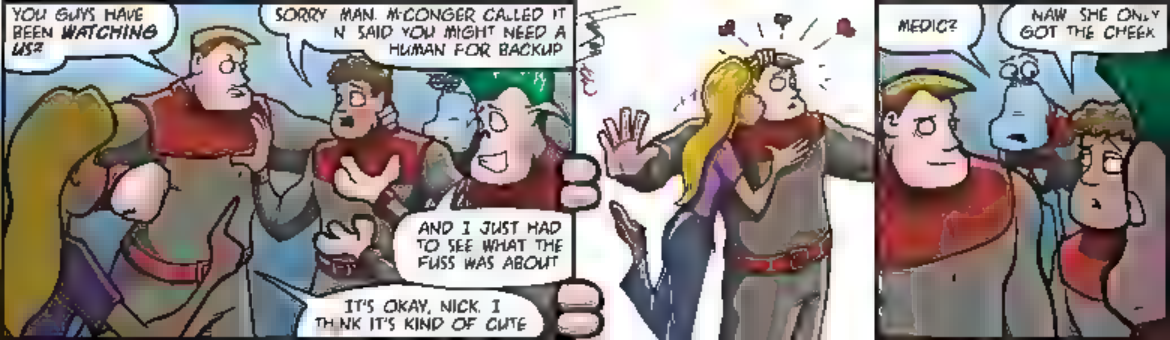

ALSO HERE IN MALL ONE'S LOW GRAVITY THE CORNERS ARE JUST CONVENIENT PLACES TO PUSH OFF


ELAPSED TIME 40 SECONDS
LEGS CURRENT SPEED 13.45 METERS PER SECOND
LEGS AVERAGE SPEED 9.95 METERS PER SECOND
LEGS CURRENT ACCELERATION: NEGATIVE 16.25 METERS PER SECOND SQUARED
LEGS CURRENT BLOOD PRESSURE: A BIT TOO HIGH EVEN FOR HER


ANDY! LET GO I NEED TO
SHHH! NICK'S ABOUT TO SCORE!
HUMANS PUT A LOT OF STOCK 'N KISSING, AND SHE'S TOTALLY GOING TO KISS HIM.
BUT SHE'S
GOING TO BE DISTRACTED BY ALL THE NOISE YOU'RE MAKING DON'T INTERRUPT THE KISS,
AND NO HELPING IT ALONG WITH YOUR LONG-DISTANCE LICKING, EITHER
THT
THQUEETHING THA' HURITH


ANDY REMEMBER HOW ALL OF THE SECURITY CAMERAS WENT TO SLEEP AT THE SAME TIME?
YEAH. WHAT ABOUT 'EM?
THAT WOMAN WITH NICK IS THE ONE WHO TURNED 'EM ALL OFF
WELL, RIGHT NOW I THINK SHE'S TRYING TO TURN NICK ON.
WILL YOU TWO SHUT UP? I'M TRYING TO GET SOME VICARIOUS ACTION HERE


NICK, YOU'RE SWEET WE SHOULD DO THIS AGAIN.
UM. OKAY?
MAYBE DURING THE ARMORBALL PLAYOFFS.
YOU LIKE TO WATCH ARMORBALL?
IF THERE'S A GAME ON YOU AND I COULD GO TO DINNER AND YOUR BUDDIES WOULD HAVE SOMETHING TO WATCH BESIDES US


YOU GUYS HAVE BEEN WATCHING US?
SORRY MAN. MCCONGER CALLED IT N SAID YOU MIGHT NEED A HUMAN FOR BACKUP
AND I JUST HAD TO SEE WHAT THE FUSS WAS ABOUT
IT'S OKAY, NICK. I THINK IT'S KIND OF CUTE
MEDIC?
NAW SHE ONLY GOT THE CHEEK

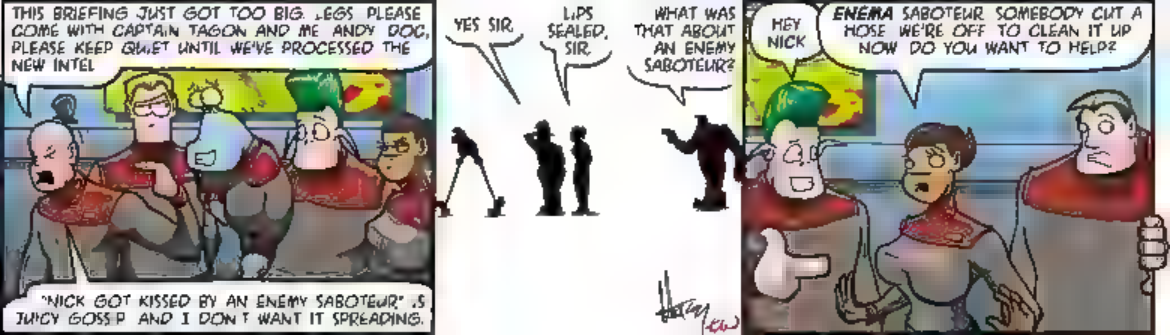

HEY THAT KISS BREAKS THE CURSE RIGHT?
I DUNNO. ASK THE DOC. OR MAYBE LEGS. THEY'RE THE CURSE EXPERTS.
YEAH, UMM.. NICK, THERE'S SOMETHING I NEED TO TELL YOU..
CURSE BROKEN. TOTALLY
WITH FOUR HANDS I'M BOUND TO FIND A PRESSURE POINT SOMEWHERE

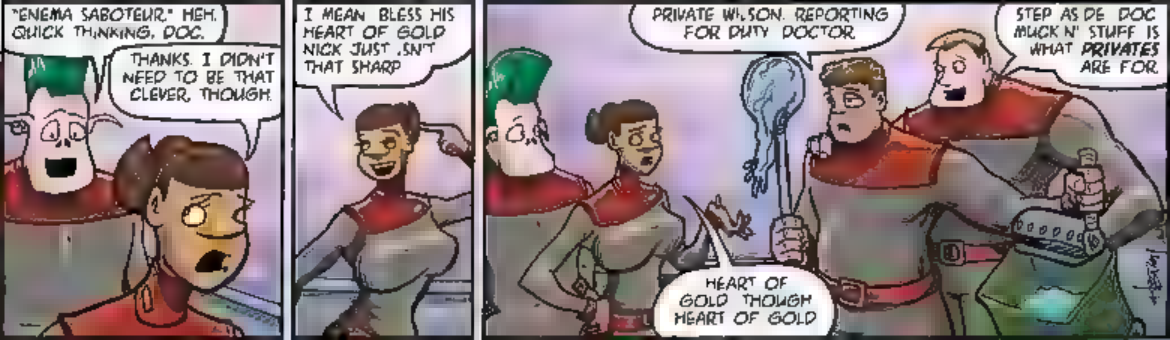

SEE HOW HAPPY YOU MADE HIM? HE GOT HIS CURSE BREAKING KISS FROM A BEAUTIFUL HUMAN GIRL AND ALL IS WELL IN HIS WORLD
WE NEED TO TELL HIM THE TRUTH. THAT GIRL. SHE'S THE ENEMY
WHO'S THE ENEMY? HAVE WE LEARNED SOMETHING?
OH, HELLO, COMMANDER
THE GIRL WHO TRIPPED ME UP? SHE'S ALSO THE ONE WHO SHUT DOWN THE CAMERAS. AND NOW SHE'S MAKING A MOVE ON NICK.


SOMEBODY'S MAKING A MOVE ON NICK? HAS HE GOTTEN HIS MAGIC CURSE BREAKING KISS YET?
I'VE BEEN MEANING TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT THAT, DOCTOR. ARE YOU SURE YOU SHOULD BE ENCOURAGING SUPERSTITIOUS BEHAVIOR?
YES, HE GOT KISSED. YES, IT WAS MAGIC. NO, WE SHOULD NOT BE ENCOURAGING THIS.


GIVING NICK A WAY TO BREAK HIS CURSE WAS YOUR IDEA, CORPORAL
AND YOUR IDEA WAS TO SEND HIM CAREENING THROUGH THE LOCALS INSTEAD OF KISSING HIM YOURSELF, DOCTOR.


K SSING HIM MYSELF WOULD HAVE SET A BAD PRECEDENT
AND PUSHING NICK NTO THE AMPLE BOSOM OF THE ENEMY SETS A GOOD PRECEDENTz
OUR ENEMY HAS AN AMPLE BOSOMz
SHE'S HUMAN ALL YOUR FEMALES ARE AMPLY BOSOMED

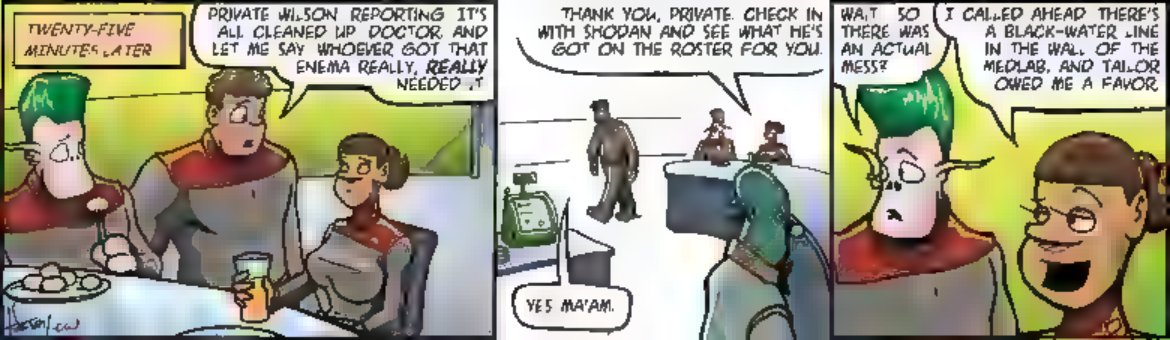

THIS BRIEFING JUST GOT TOO BIG. LEGS PLEASE COME WITH CAPTAIN TAGON AND ME. ANDY DOC, PLEASE KEEP QUIET UNTIL WE'VE PROCESSED THE NEW INTEL
"NICK GOT KISSED BY AN ENEMY SABOTEUR" IS JUICY GOSSIP AND I DON'T WANT IT SPREADING.
YES SIR.
LIPS SEALED, SIR.
WHAT WAS THAT ABOUT AN ENEMY SABOTEUR?
HEY NICK
ENEMA SABOTEUR. SOMEBODY CUT A HOSE WE'RE OFF TO CLEAN IT UP NOW DO YOU WANT TO HELP?


"ENEMA SABOTEUR." HEH. QUICK THINKING, DOC.
THANKS. I DIDN'T NEED TO BE THAT CLEVER, THOUGH.
I MEAN BLESS HIS HEART OF GOLD NICK JUST ISN'T THAT SHARP
PRIVATE WILSON. REPORTING FOR DUTY DOCTOR.
STEP AS DE DOC MUCK N' STUFF IS WHAT PRIVATES ARE FOR.
HEART OF GOLD THOUGH HEART OF GOLD


BRIEFING IN PROGRESS.
YOU GOT I.D ON HER?
YEAH. NO LAW ENFORCEMENT FLAGS OR WE'RD POLITICAL HOOKS. PAST THAT, ALL WE KNOW IS THAT SHE TURNED OUR CAMERAS OFF AND BODY-CHECKED ME
YOU SAID SHE WANTS TO TAKE NICK OUT ON A DATE. IF OUR ENEMY HAS SOMETHING NEW PLANNED, MAYBE SHE'S PLAYING NICK FOR INTEL
IF THIS KATHRYN PERSON CAN GET INTEL OUT OF CORPORAL NICHOLSON I WANT TO SEE HOW SHE DOES IT
THEN MAYBE I WANT TO HIRE HER


IN MOST MARTIAL FORMS ONCE YOU HAVE SUCCESSFULLY ANTICIPATED A BLOW YOU USE YOUR OPPONENT'S MOMENTUM TO YOUR ADVANTAGE
WE'RE PRETTY SURE KATHRYN IS SQUEEZING NICK FOR INFORMATION WE SHOULD USE COUNTER-INTELLIGENCE TACTICS TO TURN THIS TO OUR FAVOR.
THE ONLY DRAWBACK IS THAT I DON'T THINK NICK IS SHARP ENOUGH TO DO COUNTER-INTELLIGENCE.
HERE IT COMES.
BAM.
COUNTER-INTELLIGENCE SUMS NICK UP PERFECTLY

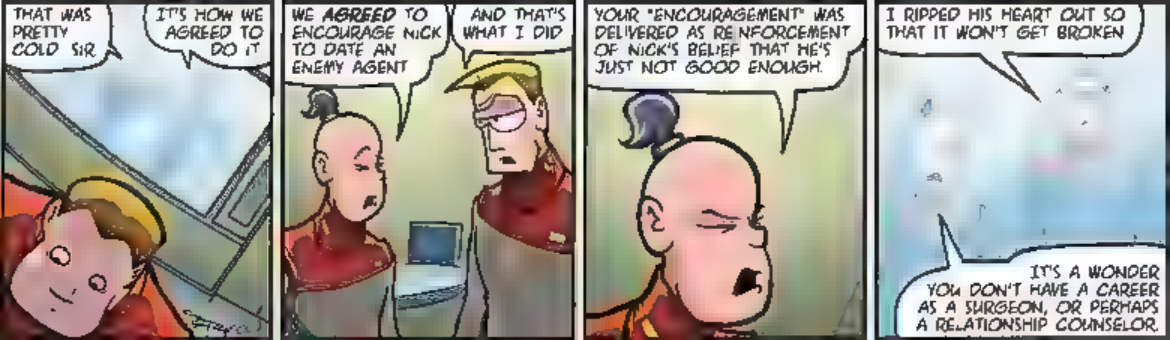

S RS. WITH ALL DUE RESPECT, YOU'RE NOT GIVING NICK ENOUGH CREDIT
HE S SUPERSTITIOUS, GULLIBLE, AND EASILY DISTRACTED BUT HE'S NOT STUPID
HE'S A FINE SOLDIER, A LOYAL FRIEND AND IF YOU ASK HIM TO TURN HIS DATE WITH KATHRYN INTO A COUNTER-INTELLIGENCE OP, HE'LL DO IT FOR YOU.
HE'LL SCREW IT UP
HE'S PREDICTABLE

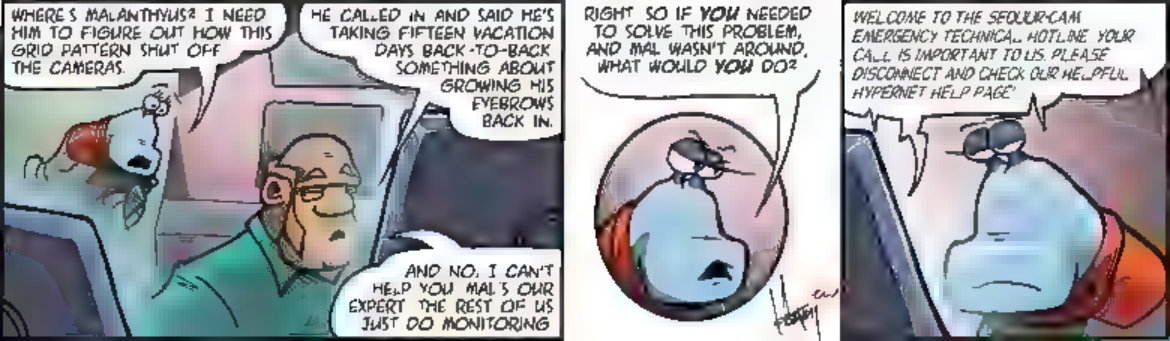

TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER
PRIVATE WILSON REPORTING IT'S ALL CLEANED UP DOCTOR AND LET ME SAY WHOEVER GOT THAT ENEMA REALLY, REALLY NEEDED IT
THANK YOU, PRIVATE. CHECK IN WITH SHODAN AND SEE WHAT HE'S GOT ON THE ROSTER FOR YOU.
YES MA'AM.
WAIT SO THERE WAS AN ACTUAL MESS?
I CALLED AHEAD THERE'S A BLACK-WATER LINE IN THE WALL OF THE MEDLAB, AND TAILOR OWED ME A FAVOR


MAIL ONE CREW QUARTERS COMMONS ROOM DECK 20 45 NORTH AT THE 330°
CONGRATULATIONS, CORPORAL NICHOLSON!
SIR?
I UNDERSTAND YOU BROKE A CURSE TODAY
MAYBE
I DUNNO
WELL. IF YOU DON'T KNOW THEN YOU OUGHT TO BE PRESSING FOR BETTER INTEL, RIGHT?
MAYBE MAYBE NOT

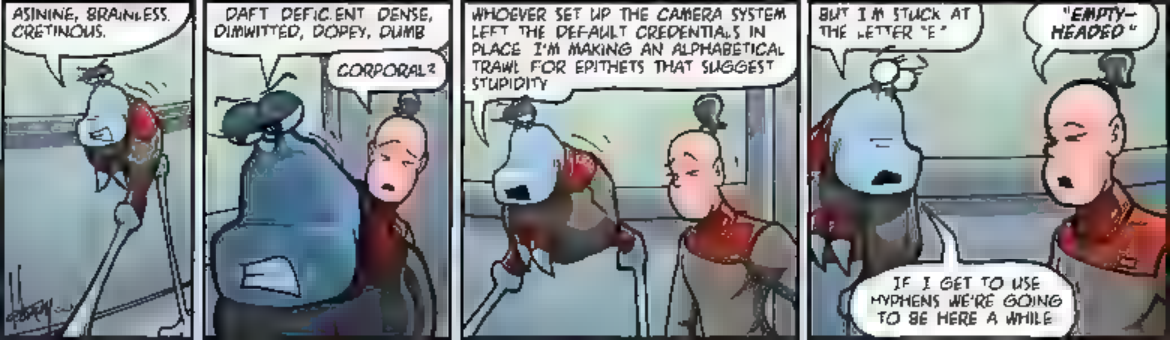

KATHRYN, SHE'S WAY PRETTIER, AND WAY WAY SMARTER THAN ME. SHE'S GOTTA BE AFTER SOMETHIN' BESIDES "BIG AN' DUMB"
YOU THINK SHE'S A SPY?
NAW THAT'S NOT IT SEE GIRLS WHO LIKE MEN IN UNIFORM. THEY DON'T REALLY SEE US
THEY SEE THE COMPANY, AN' FIGURE ANYBODY IN THE UNIFORM'S STRONG TOUGH AND STUFF
THEN THEY FIGURE THE MORE PIPS A GUY'S GOT ON HIS SHOULDERS, THE BETTER THE DINNER PLANS ARE GONNA BE.


KATHRYN'S OUTTA MY LEAGUE I THINK SHE'S PLAYIN' THE FIELD HOPIN' TO SCORE HERSELF A HANDSOME OFFICER
WHO? SHODAN? MASSEY? ME?
PROB'LY YOU, YEAH.
WELL THEN, SOLDIER, YOU OWE T TO YOUR CAPTAIN TO ASK KATHRYN OUT AND SEE WHAT SHE WANTS
YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT SHE LOOKS LIKE, SIR
YOU SAID SHE'S PRETT ER THAN YOU. THAT'S A START

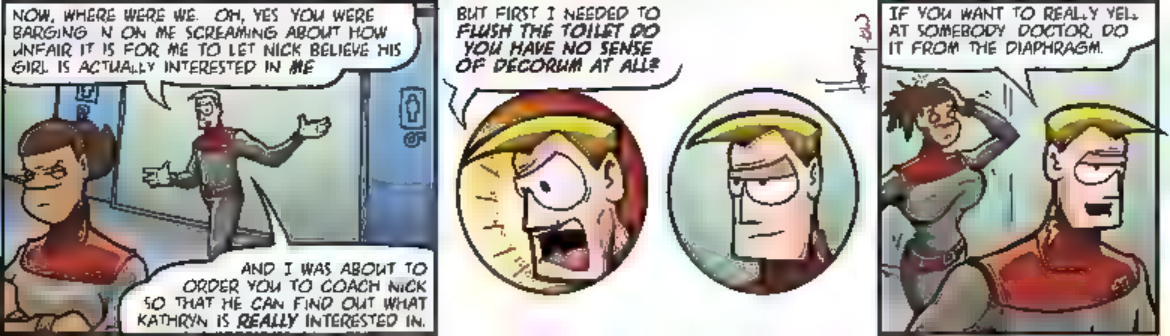

THAT WAS PRETTY COLD SIR
IT'S HOW WE AGREED TO DO IT
WE AGREED TO ENCOURAGE NICK TO DATE AN ENEMY AGENT
AND THAT'S WHAT I DID
YOUR "ENCOURAGEMENT" WAS DELIVERED AS REINFORCEMENT OF NICK'S BELIEF THAT HE'S JUST NOT GOOD ENOUGH.
I RIPPED HIS HEART OUT SO THAT IT WON'T GET BROKEN
IT'S A WONDER YOU DON'T HAVE A CAREER AS A SURGEON, OR PERHAPS A RELATIONSHIP COUNSELOR.

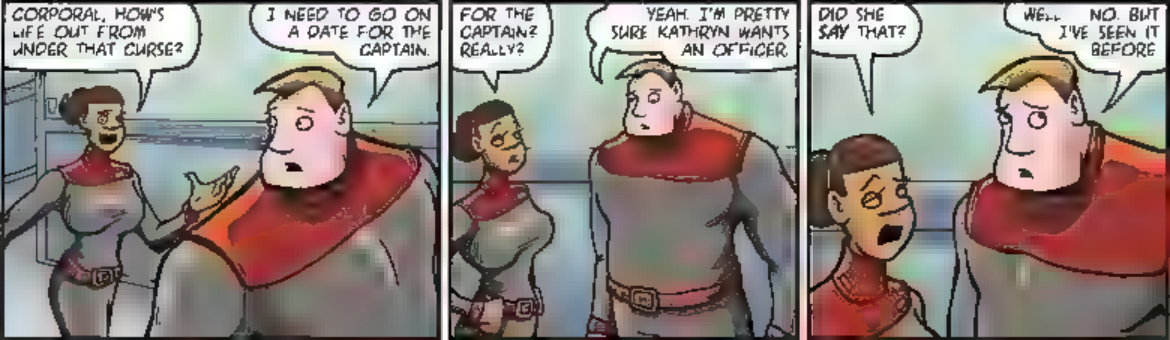

WHERE'S MALANTHYUS? I NEED HIM TO FIGURE OUT HOW THIS GRID PATTERN SHUT OFF THE CAMERAS.
HE CALLED IN AND SAID HE'S TAKING FIFTEEN VACATION DAYS BACK-TO-BACK. SOMETHING ABOUT GROWING HIS EYEBROWS BACK IN.
AND NO, I CAN'T HELP YOU. MAL'S OUR EXPERT. THE REST OF US JUST DO MONITORING.
RIGHT. SO IF YOU NEEDED TO SOLVE THIS PROBLEM, AND MAL WASN'T AROUND, WHAT WOULD YOU DO?
WELCOME TO THE SEQUOR-CAM EMERGENCY TECHNICAL HOTLINE. YOUR CALL IS IMPORTANT TO US. PLEASE DISCONNECT AND CHECK OUR HELPFUL HYPERNET HELP PAGE.


SIX HOURS LATER
SEQUUR-CAM TECH SUPPORT, I'M PATRICK O'DAY UMMM. HOW DID YOU GET THIS NUMBER?
I WAITED ON HOLD UNTIL YOU PICKED UP
THAT SHOULDN'T HAVE WORKED THERE'S AN A.I THAT INTERCEPTS LONG HOLDS AND REDIRECTS TO THE HYPERNET SITE
RIGHT I ALSO CALLED A SUICIDE HOTLINE. AND CONFERENCED US ALL TOGETHER. YOUR A.I. LET ME STRAIGHT THROUGH
INTERESTING
YEAH YOUR CALL-CENTER A.I WAS RIGHT ON THE EDGE READY TO PULL HER OWN PLUG SHE'S HAVING A NICE INTERVENTION RIGHT NOW.


ASININE, BRAINLESS. CRETINOUS.
DAFT. DEFICIENT. DENSE, DIMWITTED, DOPEY, DUMB
CORPORAL²
WHOEVER SET UP THE CAMERA SYSTEM LEFT THE DEFAULT CREDENTIALS IN PLACE I'M MAKING AN ALPHABETICAL TRAWL FOR EPITHETS THAT SUGGEST STUPIDITY
BUT I'M STUCK AT THE LETTER "E"
"EMPTY-HEADED"
IF I GET TO USE HYPHENS WE'RE GOING TO BE HERE A WHILE

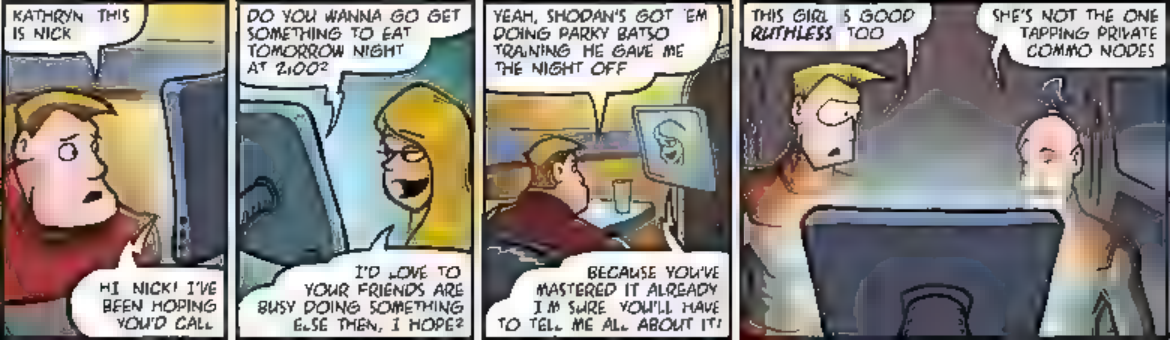

CAPTAIN, WHAT YOU DID TO NICK WAS DESPICABLE!
HEY, WHAT HAPPENED TO "PERMISSION TO SPEAK FREELY" OR "WITH ALL DUE RESPECT"?
I ALWAYS SPEAK FREELY, AND RIGHT NOW YOU'RE NOT DUE ANY RESPECT!
FINE. I'LL SETTLE FOR "EXCUSE ME SIR, I HOPE I'M NOT INTERRUPTING ANYTHING."

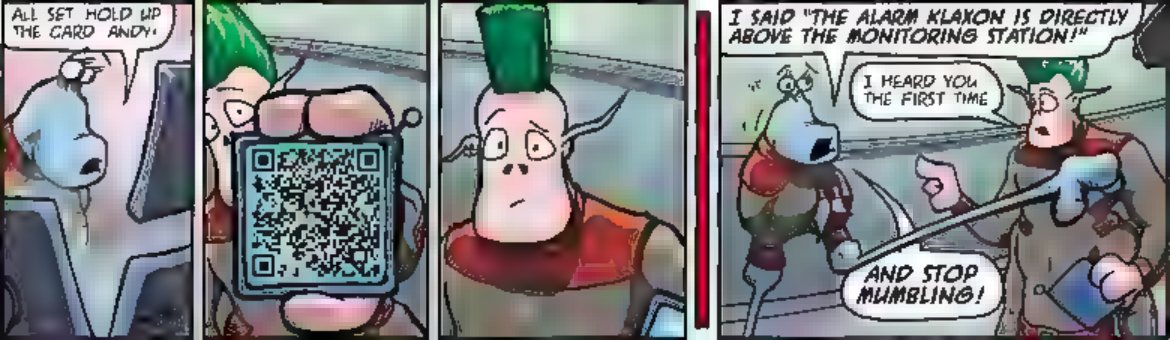

NOW, WHERE WERE WE. OH, YES YOU WERE BARGING N ON ME SCREAMING ABOUT HOW UNFAIR IT IS FOR ME TO LET NICK BELIEVE HIS GIRL IS ACTUALLY INTERESTED IN ME
AND I WAS ABOUT TO ORDER YOU TO COACH NICK SO THAT HE CAN FIND OUT WHAT KATHRYN IS REALLY INTERESTED IN.
BUT FIRST I NEEDED TO FLUSH THE TOILET DO YOU HAVE NO SENSE OF DECORUM AT ALL?
IF YOU WANT TO REALLY YEL AT SOMEBODY DOCTOR, DO IT FROM THE DIAPHRAGM.


CORPORAL, HOW'S LIFE OUT FROM UNDER THAT CURSE?
I NEED TO GO ON A DATE FOR THE CAPTAIN.
FOR THE CAPTAIN? REALLY?
YEAH. I'M PRETTY SURE KATHRYN WANTS AN OFFICER.
DID SHE SAY THAT?
WELL... NO. BUT I'VE SEEN IT BEFORE

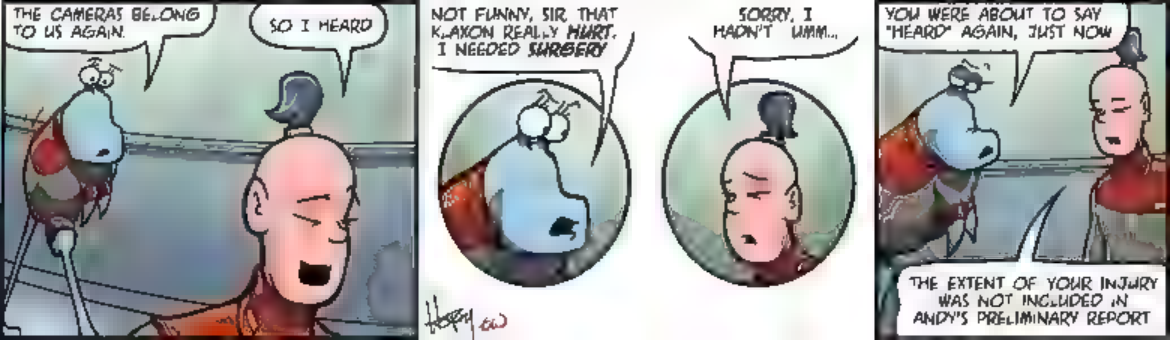

NICK.. YOU'RE BORROWING TROUBLE, AND FIRST DATES ARE TROUBLE ENOUGH WITHOUT ADDITIONAL DEBT
HOW MUCH S DINNER GOING TO COST?
NEVER MIND THAT THE COMPANY WILL PICK UP THE TAB. YOU JUST MAKE SURE TO BE YOURSELF DRESS UP A BIT, LOSE THAT MALLCOP SUIT, AND ABOVE ALL LET KATHRYN TALK. FIND OUT WHAT SHE REALLY WANTS
YOU CAN DO THIS. NICK YOU'LL BE FINE
THANKS DOC! YOU'RE THE BEST

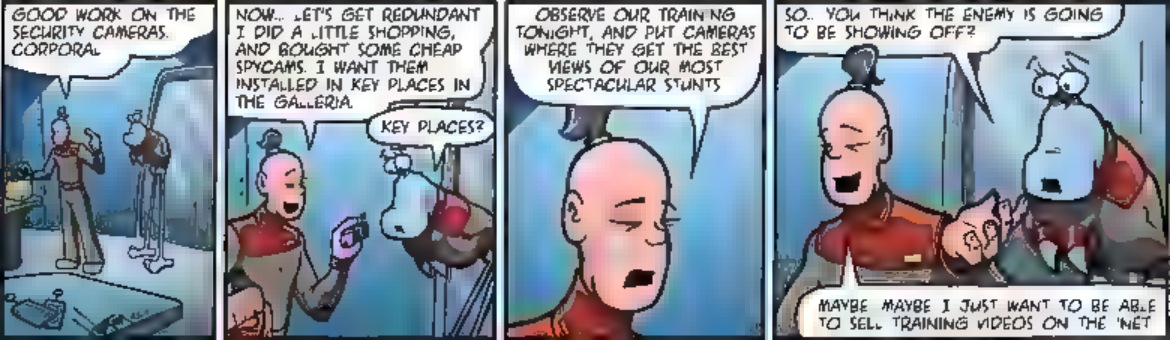

WELL?
YOUR MOLE, OR MULE, OR SLEEPER AGENT WHATEVER NICK IS SUPPOSED TO BE HE NEEDS A CHANGE OF CLOTHES BUT HE'S READY
ME. I'M GOING TO GO REVIEW THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH AND CHECK AGAIN FOR LOOPHOLES.

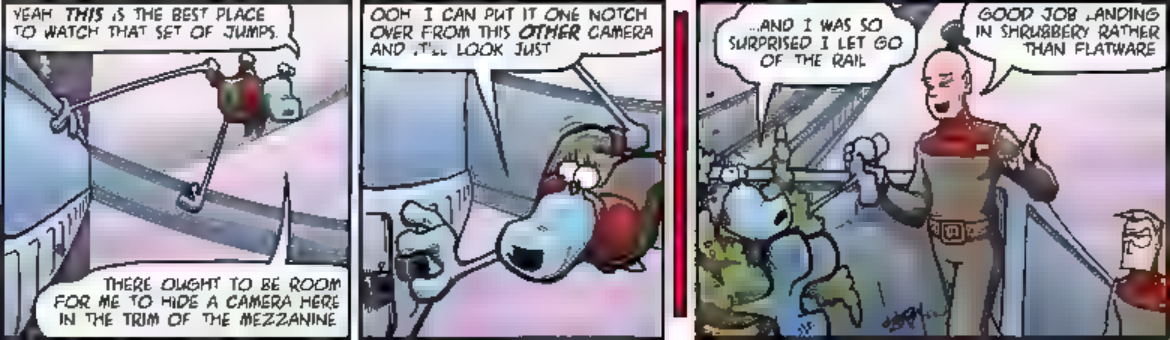

KATHRYN THIS IS NICK
HI NICK! I'VE BEEN HOPING YOU'D CALL
DO YOU WANNA GO GET SOMETHING TO EAT TOMORROW NIGHT AT 2:00?
I'D LOVE TO YOUR FRIENDS ARE BUSY DOING SOMETHING ELSE THEN, I HOPE?
YEAH, SHODAN'S GOT 'EM DOING PARRY BATSO TRAINING HE GAVE ME THE NIGHT OFF
BECAUSE YOU'VE MASTERED IT ALREADY I'M SURE YOU'LL HAVE TO TELL ME ALL ABOUT IT!
THIS GIRL IS GOOD RUTHLESS TOO
SHE'S NOT THE ONE TAPPING PRIVATE COMMO NODES

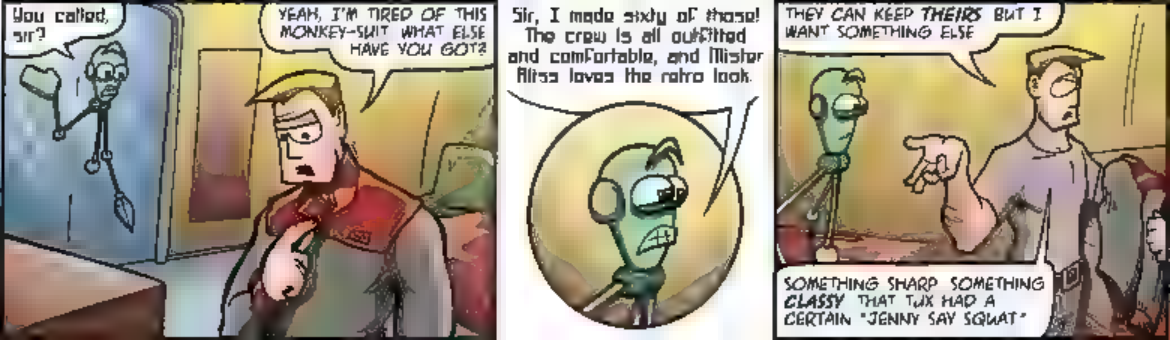

ALL SET HOLD UP THE CARD ANDY.
I SAID "THE ALARM KLAXON IS DIRECTLY ABOVE THE MONITORING STATION!"
I HEARD YOU THE FIRST TIME
AND STOP MUMBLING!


THE ALARM KLAXON BURST THREE OF YOUR SIX AURAL MEMBRANES, BUT THEY WERE EASY TO FIX.
THANKS DOC
THAT'S QUITE A LOT OF NOISE FOR A "WE'RE BEING HACKED" ALARM. I GUESS THERE IS SUCH A THING AS OVERKILL AFTER ALL, PITHY QUOTES NOTWITHSTANDING.
THAT WASN'T OVERKILL. IT WAS FRIENDLY FIRE.
OR MAYBE CLOSE AIR SUPPORT THOSE TWO CAN BE HARD TO TELL APART

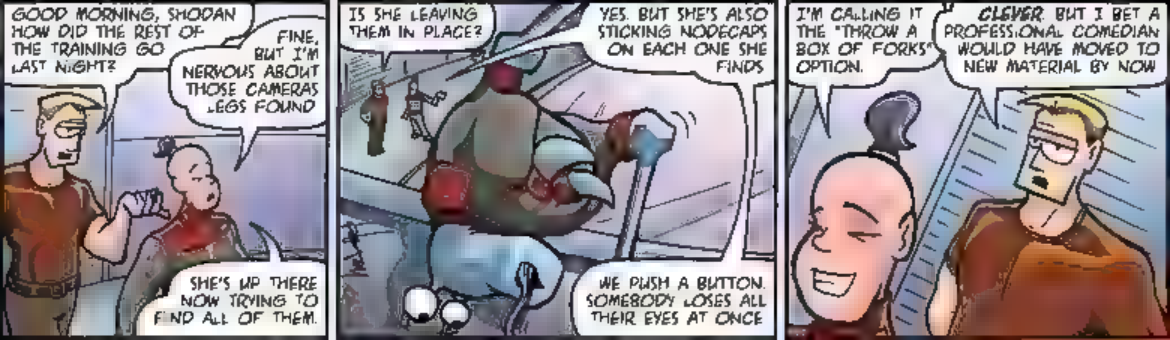

THE CAMERAS BELONG TO US AGAIN.
SO I HEARD
NOT FUNNY, SIR. THAT KLAXON REALLY HURT. I NEEDED SURGERY
SORRY. I HADN'T UMM...
YOU WERE ABOUT TO SAY "HEARD" AGAIN, JUST NOW
THE EXTENT OF YOUR INJURY WAS NOT INCLUDED IN ANDY'S PRELIMINARY REPORT


GOOD WORK ON THE SECURITY CAMERAS, CORPORAL
NOW... LET'S GET REDUNDANT I DID A LITTLE SHOPPING, AND BOUGHT SOME CHEAP SPYCAMS. I WANT THEM INSTALLED IN KEY PLACES IN THE GALLERIA.
KEY PLACES?
OBSERVE OUR TRAINING TONIGHT, AND PUT CAMERAS WHERE THEY GET THE BEST VIEWS OF OUR MOST SPECTACULAR STUNTS
SO... YOU THINK THE ENEMY IS GOING TO BE SHOWING OFF?
MAYBE MAYBE I JUST WANT TO BE ABLE TO SELL TRAINING VIDEOS ON THE 'NET

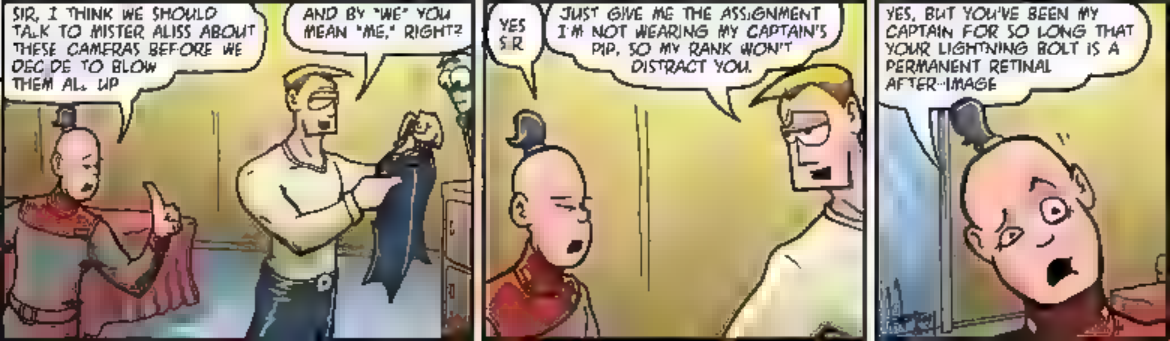

YEAH *THIS* IS THE BEST PLACE TO WATCH THAT SET OF JUMPS.
THERE OUGHT TO BE ROOM FOR ME TO HIDE A CAMERA HERE IN THE TRIM OF THE MEZZANINE
OOH I CAN PUT IT ONE NOTCH OVER FROM THIS *OTHER* CAMERA AND I'LL LOOK JUST
...AND I WAS SO SURPRISED I LET GO OF THE RAIL
GOOD JOB LANDING IN SHRUBBERY RATHER THAN FLATWARE

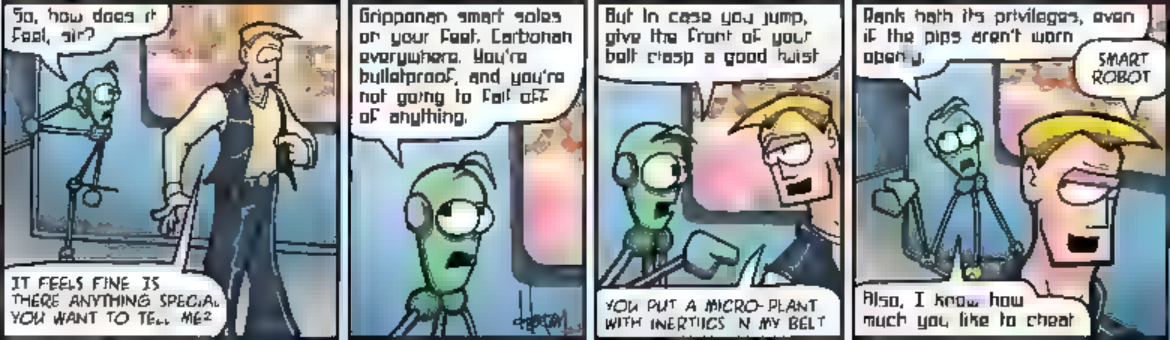

You called, sir?
YEAH, I'M TIRED OF THIS MONKEY-SUIT WHAT ELSE HAVE YOU GOT?
Sir, I made sixty of those! The crew is all outfitted and comfortable, and Mister Alisa loves the retro look.
THEY CAN KEEP THEIRS BUT I WANT SOMETHING ELSE
SOMETHING SHARP SOMETHING CLASSY THAT TUX HAD A CERTAIN "JENNY SAY SQUAT"

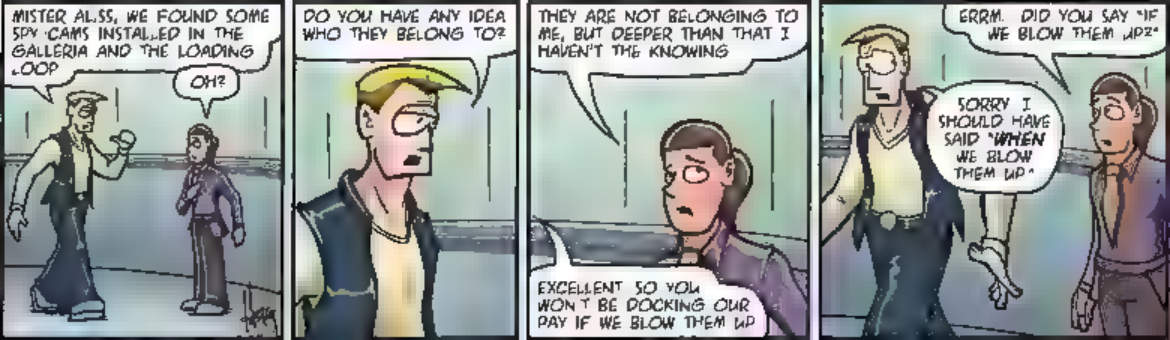

Um... Jonny said what?
BUT IT NEEDS TO BE CASUAL, AND NOT STICK OUT I DELEGATED COMMAND TO SHODAN, YET I KEEP COACHING FROM THE SIDELINES.
Oh, I get it. You mean "Je ne sais quoi." That undefined element, the "I don't know what."
TAILOR, WHAT'S GOTTEN INTO YOU? I'M ASKING YOU TO MAKE ME SOME CLOTHES, AND YOU'RE CORRECTING MY GRAMMAR
You love me! You really love me!

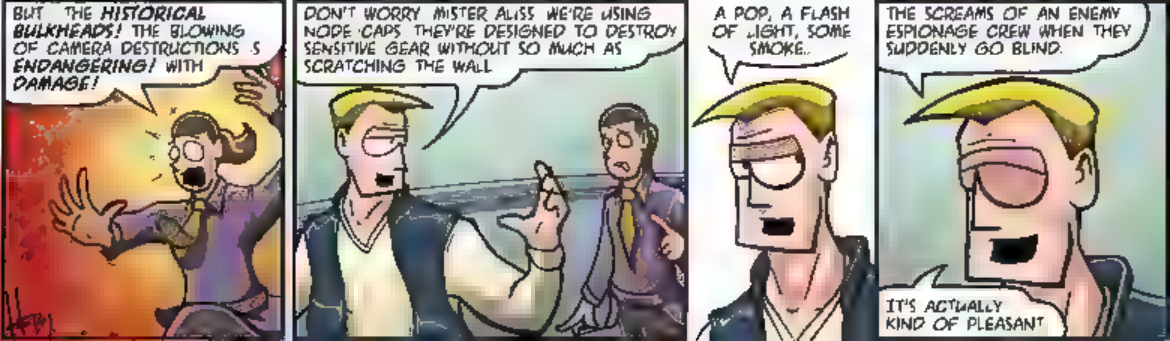

GOOD MORNING, SHODAN HOW DID THE REST OF THE TRAINING GO LAST NIGHT?
FINE, BUT I'M NERVOUS ABOUT THOSE CAMERAS LEGS FOUND
SHE'S UP THERE NOW TRYING TO FIND ALL OF THEM.
IS SHE LEAVING THEM IN PLACE?
YES. BUT SHE'S ALSO STICKING HUBCAPS ON EACH ONE SHE FINDS
WE PUSH A BUTTON. SOMEBODY LOSES ALL THEIR EYES AT ONCE
I'M CALLING IT THE "THROW A BOX OF FORKS" OPTION.
CLEVER. BUT I BET A PROFESSIONAL COMEDIAN WOULD HAVE MOVED TO NEW MATERIAL BY NOW

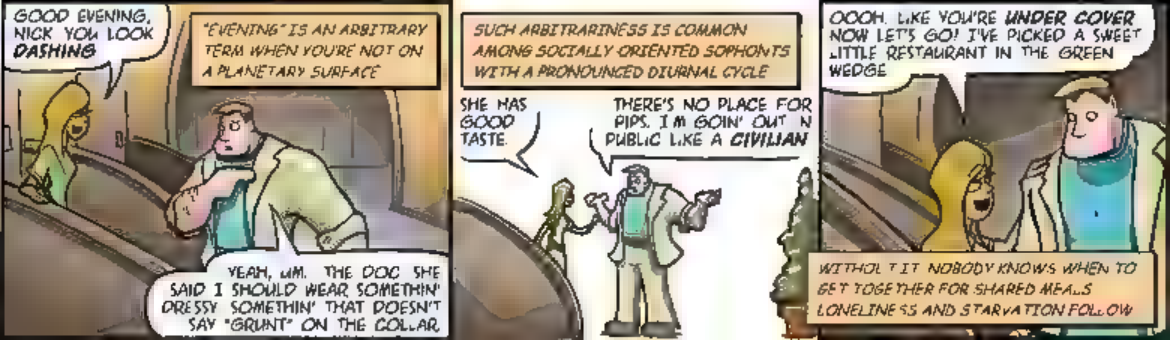

I'VE FOUND THIRTY CAMERAS THAT DON'T BELONG TO US. THEY'RE COVERING THE GALLERIA WEDGE, FOUR MAJOR PASSAGES, AND THE LOADING LOOP
YOU'VE MISSED TWO.
HOW CAN YOU POSSIBLY KNOW THAT?
THESE ARE THE SAME BRAND WE BOUGHT, AND SOPHIAWARE SELLS 'EM IN CASES OF THIRTY-TWO.
SO MAYBE THEY BROKE TWO.
OR MAYBE THEY BOUGHT THREE CASES AND YOU'VE MISSED SIXTY-SIX


SIR, I THINK WE SHOULD TALK TO MISTER ALISS ABOUT THESE CAMERAS BEFORE WE DECIDE TO BLOW THEM ALL UP
AND BY "WE" YOU MEAN "ME," RIGHT?
YES SIR
JUST GIVE ME THE ASSIGNMENT I'M NOT WEARING MY CAPTAIN'S PIP, SO MY RANK WON'T DISTRACT YOU.
YES, BUT YOU'VE BEEN MY CAPTAIN FOR SO LONG THAT YOUR LIGHTNING BOLT IS A PERMANENT RETINAL AFTER-IMAGE


So, how does it feel, sir?
IT FEELS FINE IS THERE ANYTHING SPECIAL YOU WANT TO TELL ME?
Grippanen smart soles on your feet. Carbonan everywhere. You're bullatproof, and you're not going to fall off of anything.
But in case you jump, give the front of your belt clasp a good twist
YOU PUT A MICRO-PLANT WITH INERTIICS N MY BELT
Rank hath its privileges, even if the pips aren't worn openly.
SMART ROBOT
Also, I know how much you like to cheat

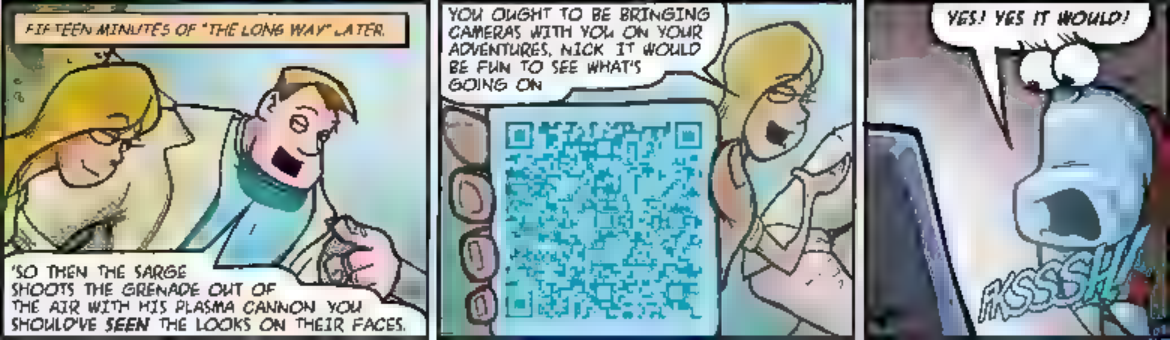

MISTER ALISS, WE FOUND SOME SPY CAMS INSTALLED IN THE GALLERIA AND THE LOADING LOOP
OH?
DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHO THEY BELONG TO?
THEY ARE NOT BELONGING TO ME, BUT DEEPER THAN THAT I HAVEN'T THE KNOWING
EXCELLENT SO YOU WON'T BE DOCKING OUR PAY IF WE BLOW THEM UP
ERRM. DID YOU SAY "IF WE BLOW THEM UP?"
SORRY I SHOULD HAVE SAID "WHEN WE BLOW THEM UP"

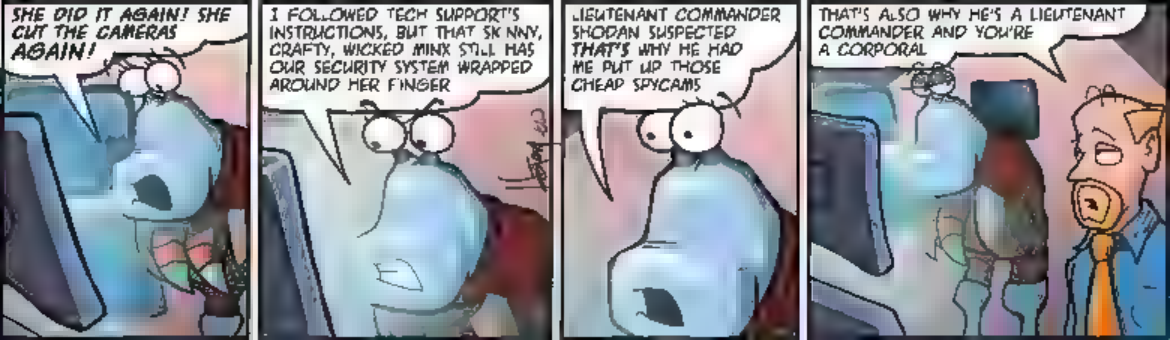

BUT THE HISTORICAL BULKHEADS! THE BLOWING OF CAMERA DESTRUCTIONS S ENDANGERING! WITH DAMAGE!
DON'T WORRY MISTER ALISS WE'RE USING NODE CAPS THEY'RE DESIGNED TO DESTROY SENSITIVE GEAR WITHOUT SO MUCH AS SCRATCHING THE WALL
A POP, A FLASH OF LIGHT, SOME SMOKE..
THE SCREAMS OF AN ENEMY ESPIONAGE CREW WHEN THEY SUDDENLY GO BLIND.
IT'S ACTUALLY KIND OF PLEASANT


GOOD EVENING, NICK YOU LOOK DASHING
"EVENING" IS AN ARBITRARY TERM WHEN YOURE NOT ON A PLANETARY SURFACE
YEAH, UM. THE DOC SHE SAID I SHOULD WEAR SOMETHIN' DRESSY SOMETHIN' THAT DOESN'T SAY "GRUNT" ON THE COLLAR
SUCH ARBITRARINESS IS COMMON AMONG SOCIALLY ORIENTED SOPHONTS WITH A PRONOUNCED DIURNAL CYCLE
SHE HAS GOOD TASTE.
THERE'S NO PLACE FOR PIPS. I M GOIN' OUT N PUBLIC LIKE A CIVILIAN
OOOH. LIKE YOU'RE UNDER COVER NOW LET'S GO! I'VE PICKED A SWEET LITTLE RESTAURANT IN THE GREEN WEDGE
WITHOUT IT NOBODY KNOWS WHEN TO GET TOGETHER FOR SHARED MEALS LONELINESS AND STARVATION FOLLOW

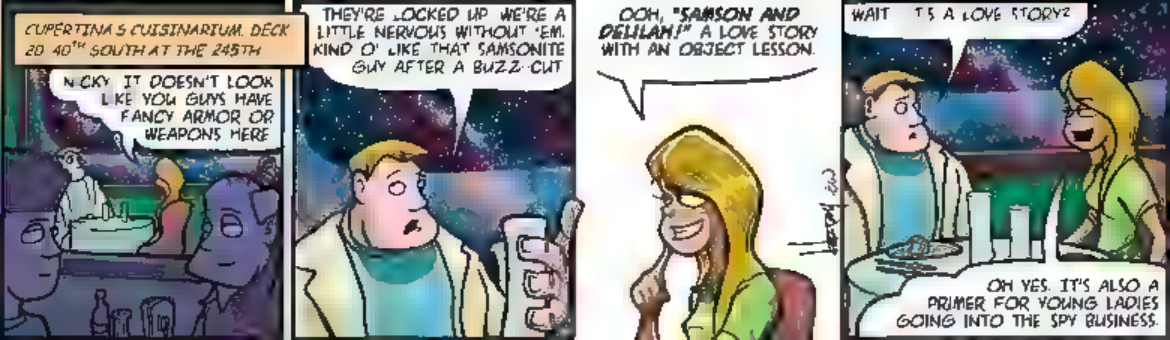

ON A LESS ARBITRARY NOTE IN 394 HOURS THURL WILL BE INTERRUPTING EVERYTHING
NOW THEN TELL ME ALL ABOUT YOURSELF NICK
UMM I DON'T KNOW WHAT I SHOULD SAY
STRONG AND SILENT ONLY GETS YOU SO FAR, BIG GUY I'M TAKING US THERE THE LONG WAY YOU START FILLING THE SILENCE

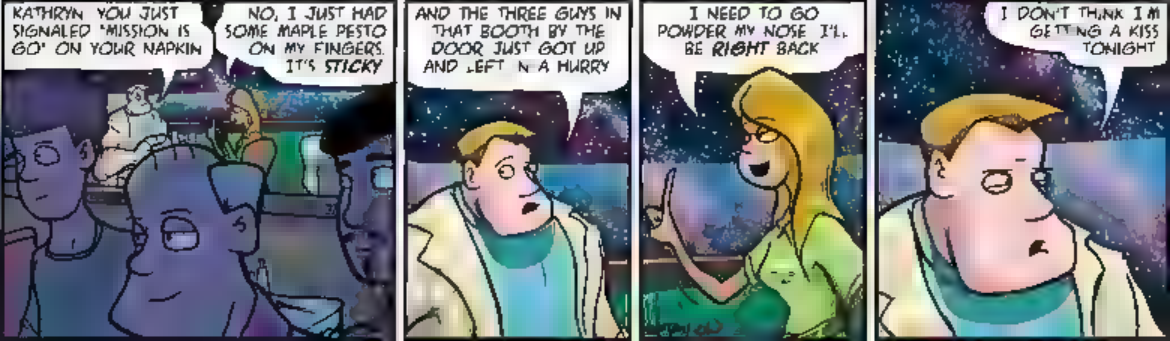

MEANWHILE OBSERVING
OH, YEAH, THIS GIRL IS GOOD
BUT WE'RE WATCHING AND SHE CAN'T SHUT US OFF

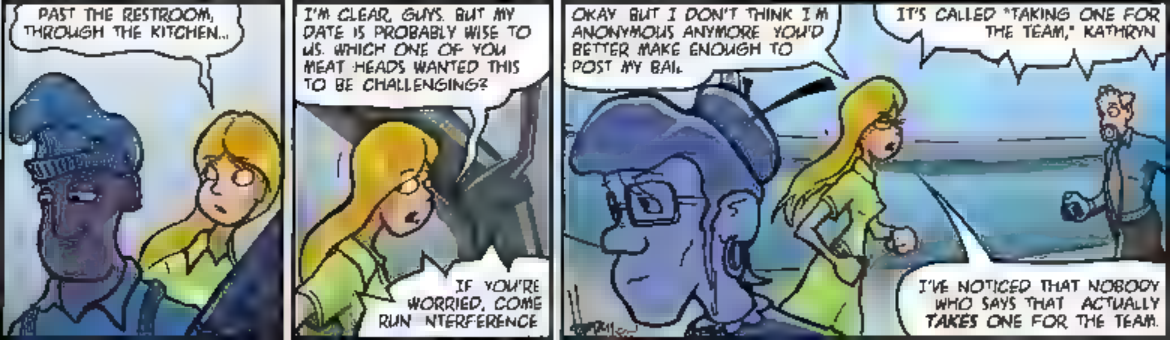

FIFTEEN MINUTES OF "THE LONG WAY" LATER.
'SO THEN THE SARGE SHOOTS THE GRENADE OUT OF THE AIR WITH HIS PLASMA CANNON YOU SHOULD'VE SEEN THE LOOKS ON THEIR FACES.
YOU OUGHT TO BE BRINGING CAMERAS WITH YOU ON YOUR ADVENTURES, NICK IT WOULD BE FUN TO SEE WHAT'S GOING ON
YES! YES IT WOULD!
FKSSSH!

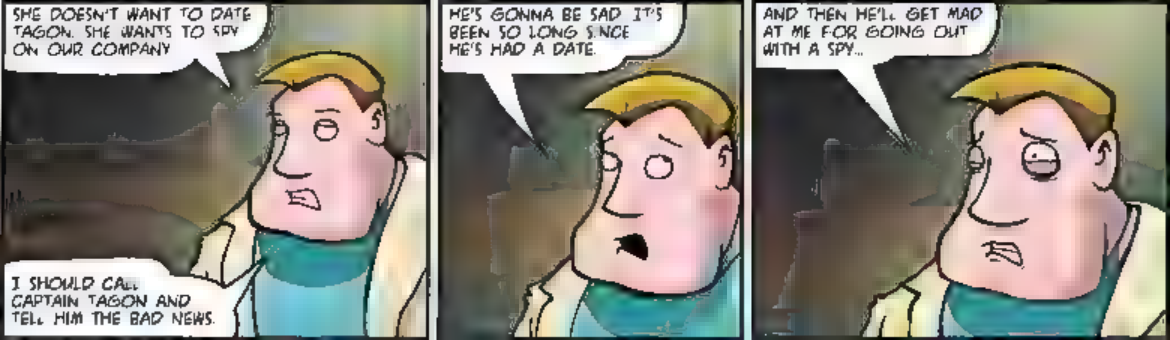

SHE DID IT AGAIN! SHE CUT THE CAMERAS AGAIN!
I FOLLOWED TECH SUPPORT'S INSTRUCTIONS, BUT THAT SKINNY, CRAFTY, WICKED MINX STILL HAS OUR SECURITY SYSTEM WRAPPED AROUND HER FINGER
LIEUTENANT COMMANDER SHODAN SUSPECTED THAT'S WHY HE HAD ME PUT UP THOSE CHEAP SPYCAMS
THAT'S ALSO WHY HE'S A LIEUTENANT COMMANDER AND YOU'RE A CORPORAL


OKAY, LIEUTENANT REYNSTEIN WHAT ORDERS DO YOU HAVE FOR THIS LOWLY CORPORAL?
I UMM.
THAT'S WHAT I THOUGHT RUN THIS SPYCAM TO CUPERTINA'S CUISINARIUM IN THE GREEN WEDGE. I WANT EYES ON NICK, FAST
I'LL CALL SHODAN TO LET HIM KNOW WE'VE LOST THE MAIN CAMERAS. AND THAT SOMETHING IS PROBABLY ABOUT TO GO DOWN
I CAN'T GIVE YOU ORDERS, LIEUTENANT BUT YOU SHOULD BE RUNNING!
RIGHT. ON MY WAY!


CUPERTINA 5 CUISINARIUM. DECK 20 40TH SOUTH AT THE 245TH
NICKY. IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE YOU GUYS HAVE FANCY ARMOR OR WEAPONS HERE
THEY'RE LOCKED UP. WE'RE A LITTLE NERVOUS WITHOUT 'EM. KIND O' LIKE THAT SAMSONITE GUY AFTER A BUZZ CUT
OOH, "SAMSON AND DELILAH!" A LOVE STORY WITH AN OBJECT LESSON.
WAIT. T'S A LOVE STORY?
OH YES. IT'S ALSO A PRIMER FOR YOUNG LADIES GOING INTO THE SPY BUSINESS.

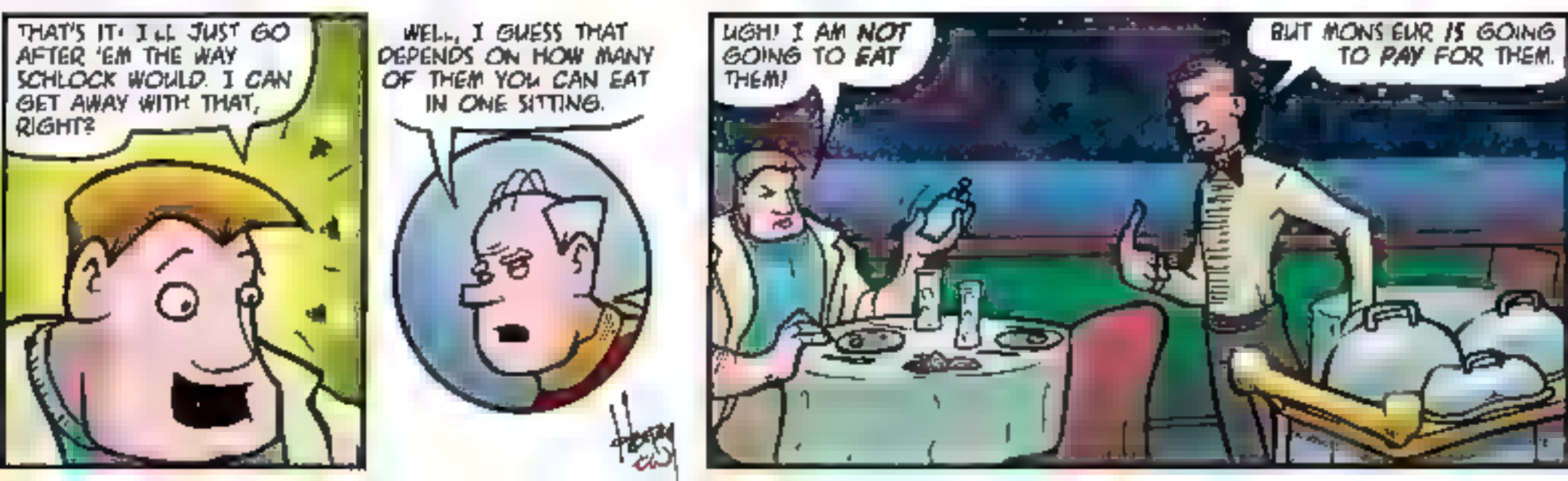

KATHRYN YOU JUST SIGNALED 'MISSION IS GO' ON YOUR NAPKIN
NO, I JUST HAD SOME MAPLE PESTO ON MY FINGERS. IT'S STICKY
AND THE THREE GUYS IN THAT BOOTH BY THE DOOR JUST GOT UP AND LEFT IN A HURRY
I NEED TO GO POWDER MY NOSE I'LL BE RIGHT BACK
I DON'T THINK I M GETTING A KISS TONIGHT


PAST THE RESTROOM, THROUGH THE KITCHEN...
I'M CLEAR, GUYS. BUT MY DATE IS PROBABLY WISE TO US. WHICH ONE OF YOU MEAT HEADS WANTED THIS TO BE CHALLENGING?
IF YOU'RE WORRIED, COME RUN INTERFERENCE
OKAY BUT I DON'T THINK I'M ANONYMOUS ANYMORE YOU'D BETTER MAKE ENOUGH TO POST MY BAIL
IT'S CALLED "TAKING ONE FOR THE TEAM," KATHRYN
I'VE NOTICED THAT NOBODY WHO SAYS THAT ACTUALLY TAKES ONE FOR THE TEAM.


SHE DOESN'T WANT TO DATE TAGON. SHE WANTS TO SPY ON OUR COMPANY
I SHOULD CALL CAPTAIN TAGON AND TELL HIM THE BAD NEWS.
HE'S GONNA BE SAD. IT'S BEEN SO LONG SINCE HE'S HAD A DATE.
AND THEN HE'LL GET MAD AT ME FOR GOING OUT WITH A SPY...


HELLO, CORPORAL. IS SOMETHING WRONG? WHERE'S TAGON OR SHODAN?
I NEED ADVICE. I DON'T WANT TO HURT TAGON'S FEELINGS, BUT THIS GIRL, HE LIKES? I'M PRETTY SURE SHE'S A SPY.
OKAY, NICK. IF SHE'S ACTUALLY A SPY, AND YOU'RE NOT JUST SEEING TREASURE MAPS IN THE HIEROGLYPHS, THEN TAGON'S FEELINGS DON'T ENTER INTO IT NOW. WHAT DO YOU THINK SHE'S AFTER?
I DON'T KNOW, BUT ONCE SHE FOUND OUT I'M UNARMED, SHE
UNARMED? YOU DON'T HAVE A HOLDOUT?

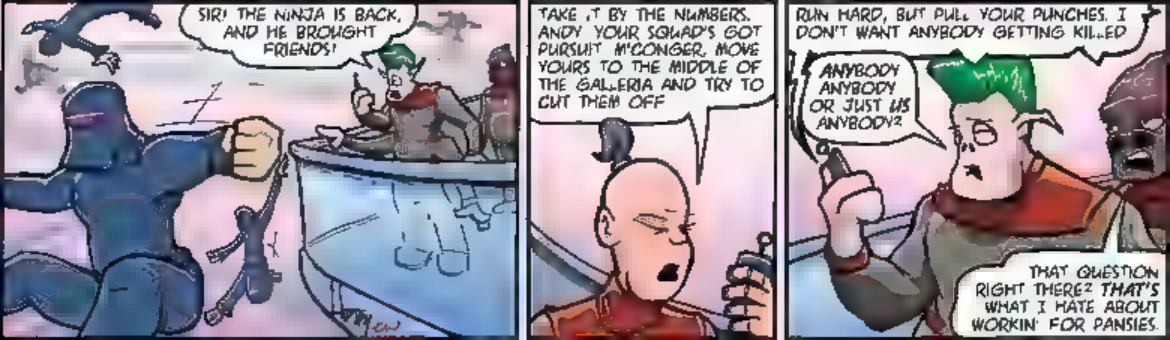

"HYSTERICAL BULKHEADS" LONG STORY BESIDES, TAGON DIDN'T ORDER ME INTO COMBAT HE ORDERED ME TO GO ON A DINNER DATE AND GET A GIRL TO LIKE HIM.
I'D HAVE DISOBEYED THAT ONE, BUT OKAY
DISOBEY ORDERS? MAYBE YOU OR SCHLOCK COULD GET AWAY WITH THAT
YEAH... SCHLOCK GETS AWAY WITH IT ALL THE TIME I WISH HE WERE HERE. WHAT WOULD SCHLOCK DO?
I DON'T KNOW WHAT SCHLOCK WOULD DO YOU JUST SAID YOU'RE UNARMED
YEAH. HE'D SHOOT FIRST AND EAT THE ASHES LATER.
BUT HE DOESN'T REALLY NEED HIS PLASGUN TO WIN.

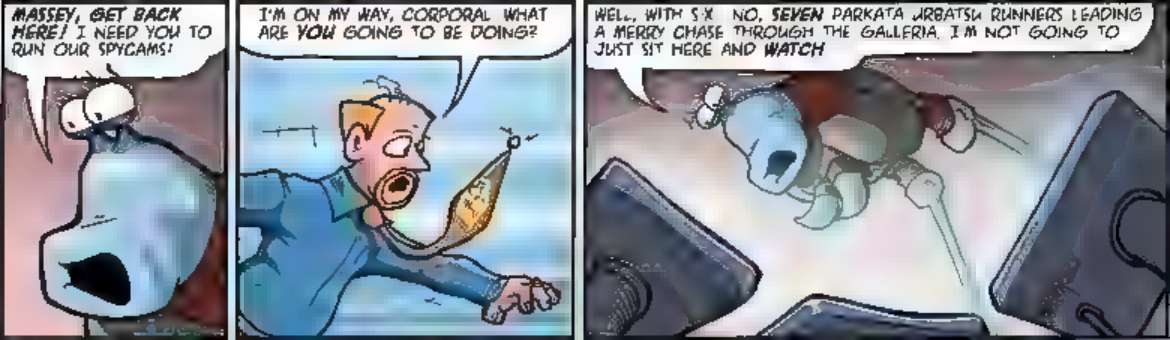

THAT'S IT! I'LL JUST GO AFTER 'EM THE WAY SCHLOCK WOULD. I CAN GET AWAY WITH THAT, RIGHT?
WELL, I GUESS THAT DEPENDS ON HOW MANY OF THEM YOU CAN EAT IN ONE SITTING.
UGH! I AM NOT GOING TO EAT THEM!
BUT MONSIEUR IS GOING TO PAY FOR THEM.

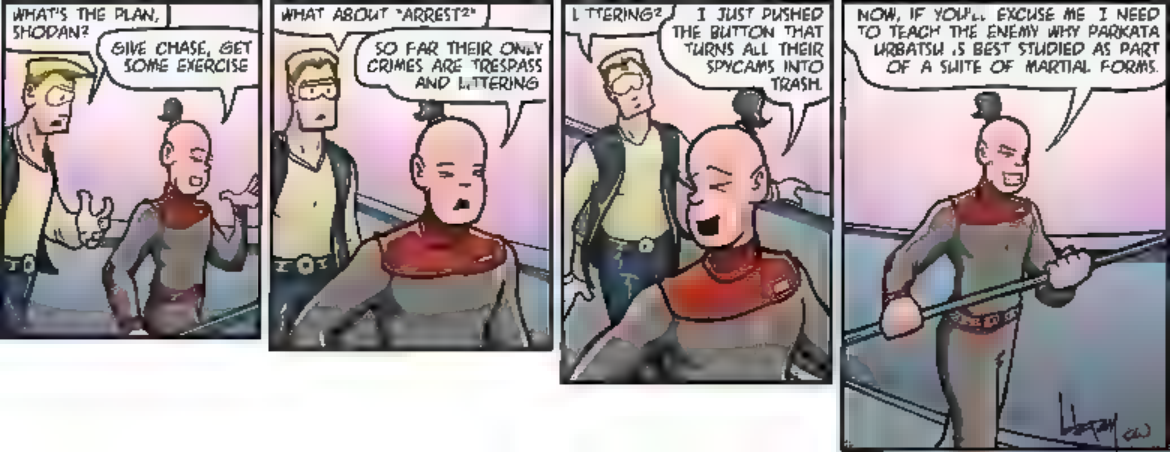

SORRY CAN'T STICK AROUND GOTTA CHASE A SPY
SPY? WHAT SPY?
MY DATE I BET SHE SNUCK THROUGH YOUR KITCHEN.
MOTHERLESS SONS OF SANSABELTS! HIDE THE RECIPES!

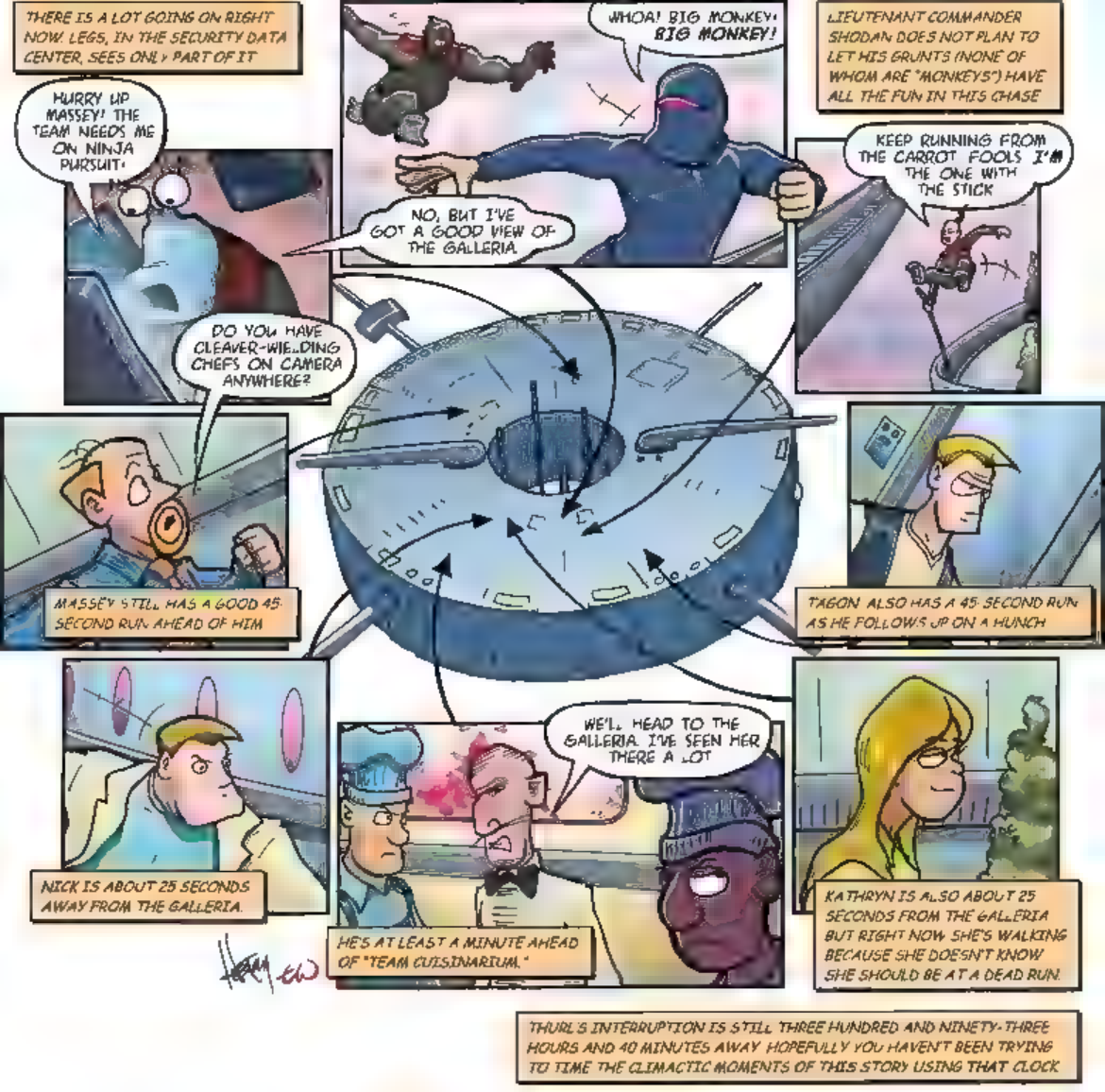

LEGS, WHERE DO YOU WANT THIS CAMERA?
KATHRYN ALREADY LEFT THE RESTAURANT, AND I THINK NICK'S ON HIS WAY OUT
WELL, I DON'T WANT IT POINTED AT YOUR FACE. I CAN'T SEE ANYTHING USEFUL
AND NEITHER CAN YOU.


SHODAN. I JUST GOT A CALL FROM THURL. NICK CALLED HIM FOR DATING ADVICE. AND SAID KATHRYN'S A SPY
HE SAID THAT IF NICK WASN'T JUST IMAGINING THINGS. SOMETHING'S GOING DOWN SOON.
SOON? REALLY?
I'M LAYING MY MONEY ON "NOW"

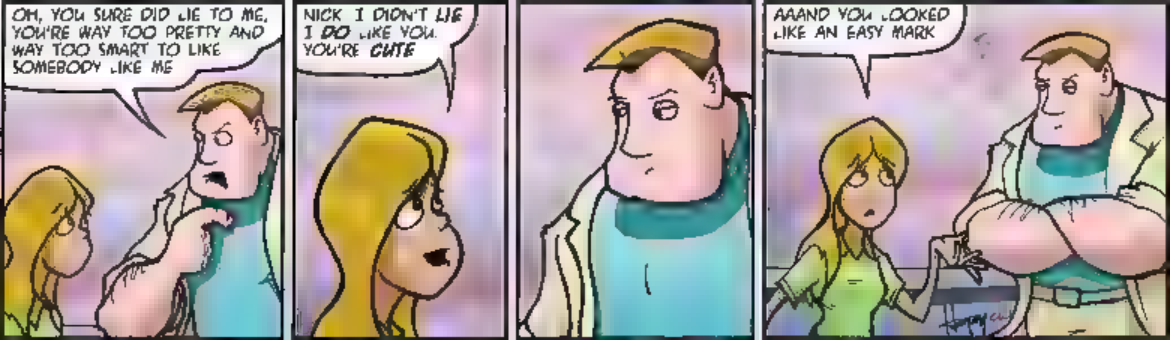

SIR! THE NINJA IS BACK, AND HE BROUGHT FRIENDS!
TAKE 'T BY THE NUMBERS. ANDY YOUR SQUAD'S GOT PURSUIT M'CONGER, MOVE YOURS TO THE MIDDLE OF THE GALLERIA AND TRY TO CUT THEM OFF
RUN HARD, BUT PULL YOUR PUNCHES. I DON'T WANT ANYBODY GETTING KILLED
ANYBODY ANYBODY OR JUST US ANYBODY?
THAT QUESTION RIGHT THERE? THAT'S WHAT I HATE ABOUT WORKIN' FOR PANSIES.

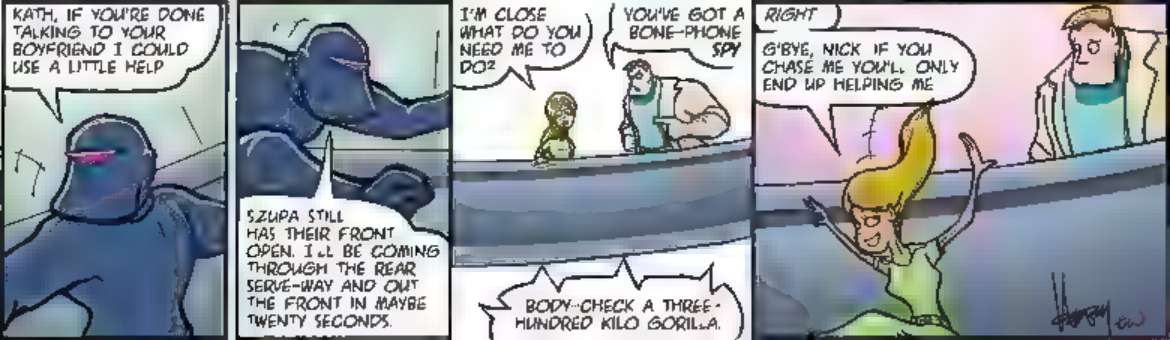

MASSEY, GET BACK HERE! I NEED YOU TO RUN OUR SPYCAMS!
I'M ON MY WAY, CORPORAL. WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO BE DOING?
WELL, WITH SIX NO, SEVEN PARKATA URBATSU RUNNERS LEADING A MERRY CHASE THROUGH THE GALLERIA, I'M NOT GOING TO JUST SIT HERE AND WATCH

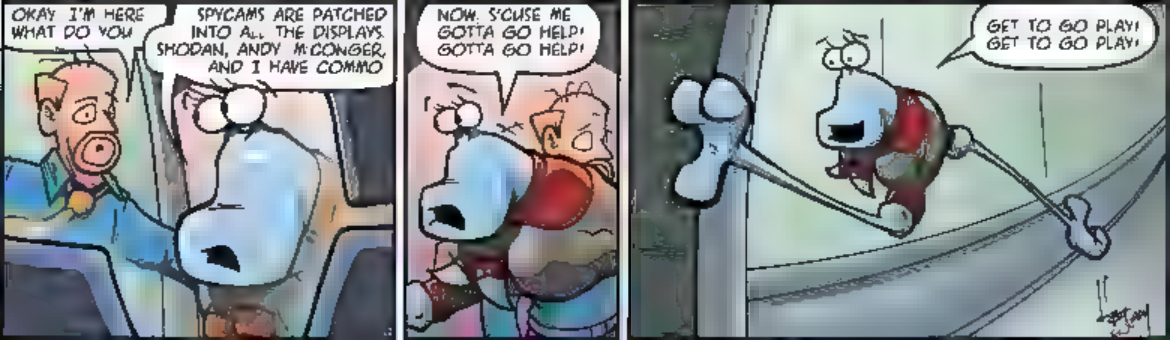

WHAT'S THE PLAN, SHODAN?
GIVE CHASE, GET SOME EXERCISE
WHAT ABOUT "ARREST"?
SO FAR THEIR ONLY CRIMES ARE TRESPASS AND LITTERING
L TTERING?
I JUST PUSHED THE BUTTON THAT TURNS ALL THEIR SPYCAMS INTO TRASH.
NOW, IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME I NEED TO TEACH THE ENEMY WHY PARKATA URBATSU IS BEST STUDIED AS PART OF A SUITE OF MARTIAL FORMS.

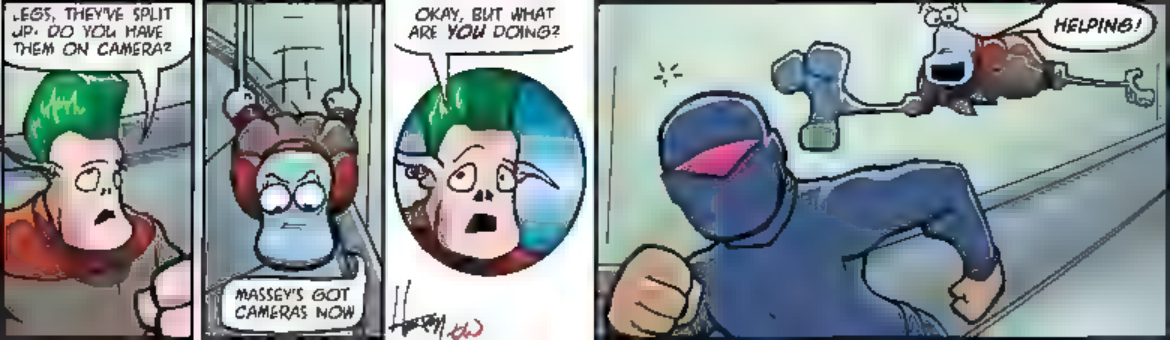

THERE IS A LOT GOING ON RIGHT NOW. LEGS, IN THE SECURITY DATA CENTER, SEES ONLY PART OF IT
WHOA! BIG MONKEY! BIG MONKEY!
LIEUTENANT COMMANDER SHODAN DOES NOT PLAN TO LET HIS GRUNTS (NONE OF WHOM ARE "MONKEYS") HAVE ALL THE FUN IN THIS CHASE
HURRY UP MASSEY! THE TEAM NEEDS ME ON NINJA PURSUIT!
NO, BUT I'VE GOT A GOOD VIEW OF THE GALLERIA.
KEEP RUNNING FROM THE CARROT FOOLS I'M THE ONE WITH THE STICK
DO YOU HAVE CLEAVER-WIELDING CHEFS ON CAMERA ANYWHERE?
MASSEY STILL HAS A GOOD 45 SECOND RUN AHEAD OF HIM
TAGON ALSO HAS A 45 SECOND RUN AS HE FOLLOWS UP ON A HUNCH
NICK IS ABOUT 25 SECONDS AWAY FROM THE GALLERIA.
WE'LL HEAD TO THE GALLERIA. I'VE SEEN HER THERE A LOT
HE'S AT LEAST A MINUTE AHEAD OF "TEAM CUISINARIUM."
KATHRYN IS ALSO ABOUT 25 SECONDS FROM THE GALLERIA BUT RIGHT NOW, SHE'S WALKING BECAUSE SHE DOESN'T KNOW SHE SHOULD BE AT A DEAD RUN.
THURL'S INTERRUPTION IS STILL THREE HUNDRED AND NINETY-THREE HOURS AND 40 MINUTES AWAY. HOPEFULLY YOU HAVEN'T BEEN TRYING TO TIME THE CLIMACTIC MOMENTS OF THIS STORY USING THAT CLOCK.


THERE SHE IS.
KATHRYN!
YOU LIED TO ME!
NICK² BLESS YOUR HAM-SIZED HEART, I NEVER LIED. I JUST DIDN'T TEL YOU THE TRUTH.
YOU'RE FASTER THAN YOU LOOK
I'M ALSO SMARTER THAN I LOOK BUT THE CAPTAIN SAYS THAT'S BECAUSE OF A REALLY LOW BAR SOMEWHERE


OH, YOU SURE DID LIE TO ME. YOU'RE WAY TOO PRETTY AND WAY TOO SMART TO LIKE SOMEBODY LIKE ME
NICK I DIDN'T LIE I DO LIKE YOU. YOU'RE CUTE
AAAND YOU LOOKED LIKE AN EASY MARK


KATH, IF YOU'RE DONE TALKING TO YOUR BOYFRIEND I COULD USE A LITTLE HELP
SZUPA STILL HAS THEIR FRONT OPEN. I'LL BE COMING THROUGH THE REAR SERVE-WAY AND OUT THE FRONT IN MAYBE TWENTY SECONDS.
I'M CLOSE WHAT DO YOU NEED ME TO DO?
YOU'VE GOT A BONE-PHONE SPY
BODY-CHECK A THREE-HUNDRED KILO GORILLA.
RIGHT
G'BYE, NICK IF YOU CHASE ME YOU'LL ONLY END UP HELPING ME


OKAY. I'M HERE WHAT DO YOU
SPYCAMS ARE PATCHED INTO ALL THE DISPLAYS. SHODAN, ANDY MCONGER, AND I HAVE COMMO
NOW. S'CUSE ME GOTTA GO HELP! GOTTA GO HELP!
GET TO GO PLAY! GET TO GO PLAY!


LEGS, THEY'VE SPLIT UP. DO YOU HAVE THEM ON CAMERA?
MASSEY'S GOT CAMERAS NOW
OKAY, BUT WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
HELPING!

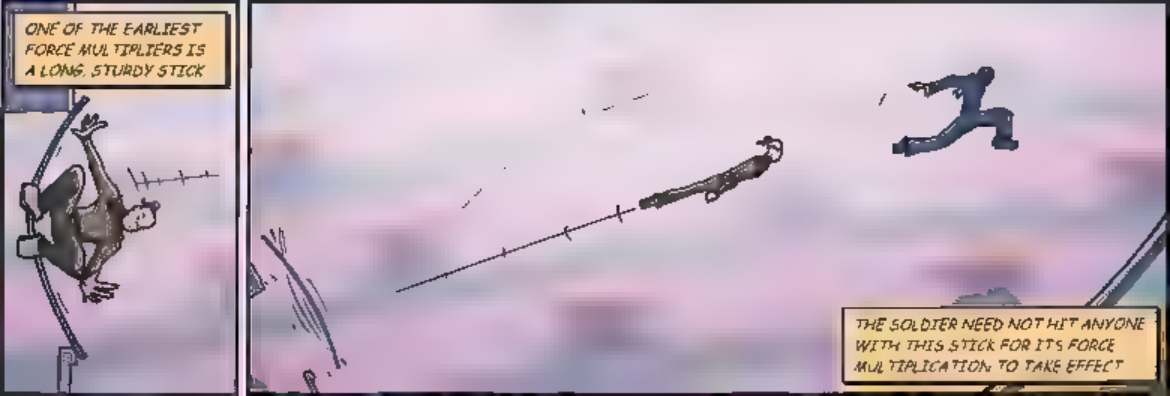

LEGS, I THINK THEY MAY BE HEADED FOR A SERVICE CHUTE!
YETH!
WHOA. LOOKS LIKE SOMEBODY RAN OUT OF APPENDAGES.
YETH. THOMEBODY THERTAINLY DID

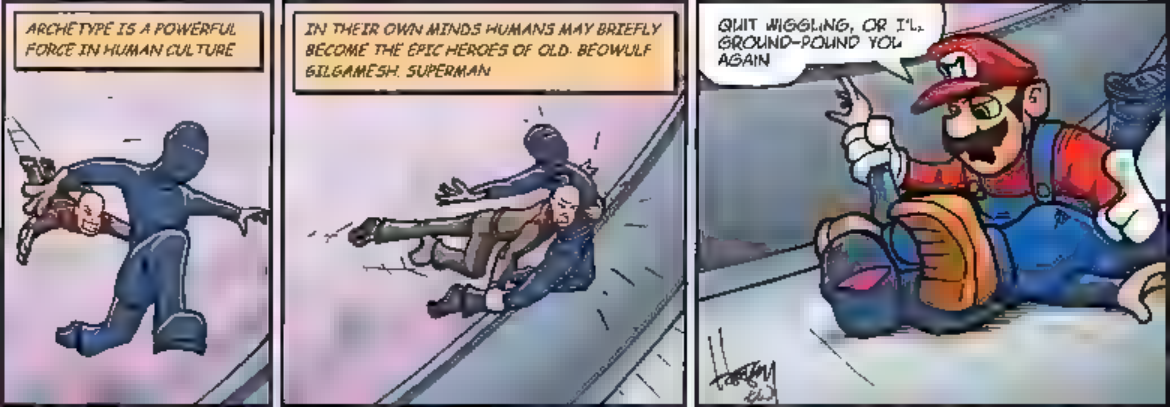
A 'FORCE MULTIPLIER' IS DEFINED AS A FACTOR THAT ENHANCES OR MULTIPLIES THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A MILITARY UNIT.



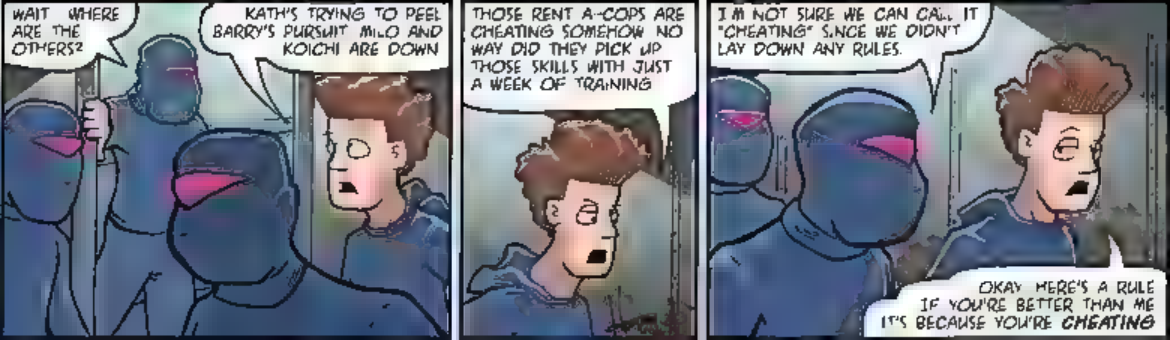
PROJECTILE WEAPONS, BODY ARMOR, SOLDIER BOOSTS, AND SUPPLY TRAINS MAY ALL BE FORCE MULTIPLIERS.

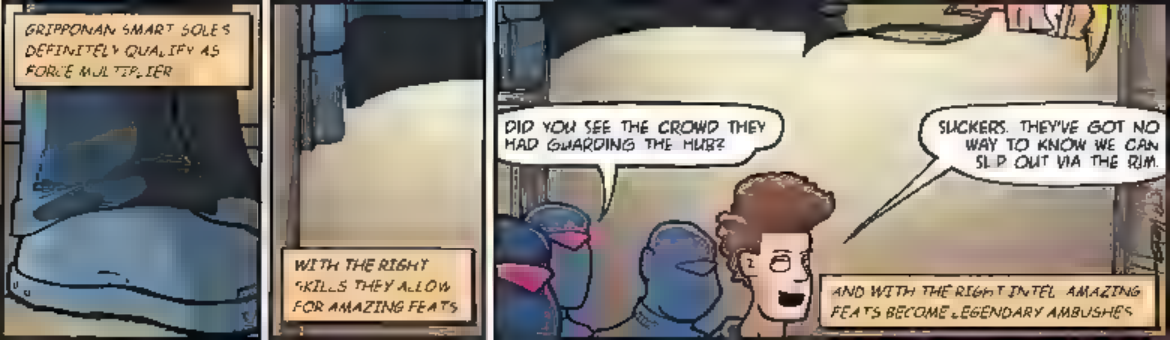
AMONG HUMANS, THE CONCEPT IS AS OLD AS OUR OPPOSABLE THUMBS.

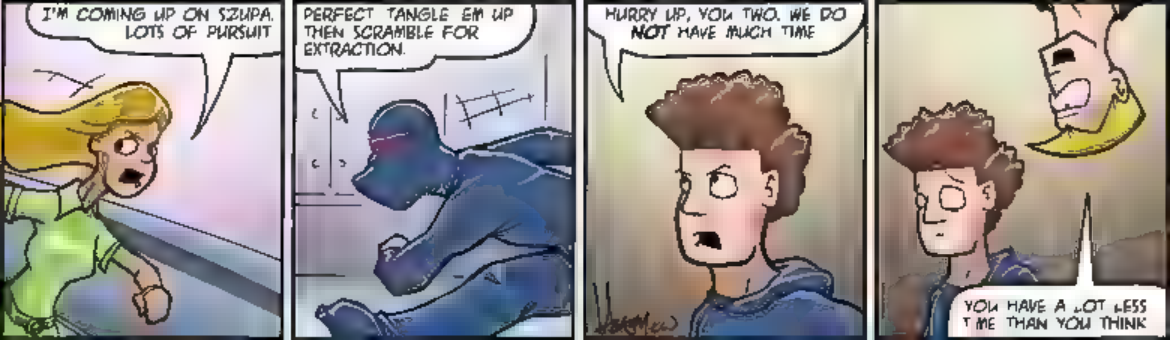

ONE OF THE EARLIEST FORCE MULTIPLIERS IS A LONG, STURDY STICK
THE SOLDIER NEED NOT HIT ANYONE WITH THIS STICK FOR ITS FORCE MULTIPLICATION TO TAKE EFFECT

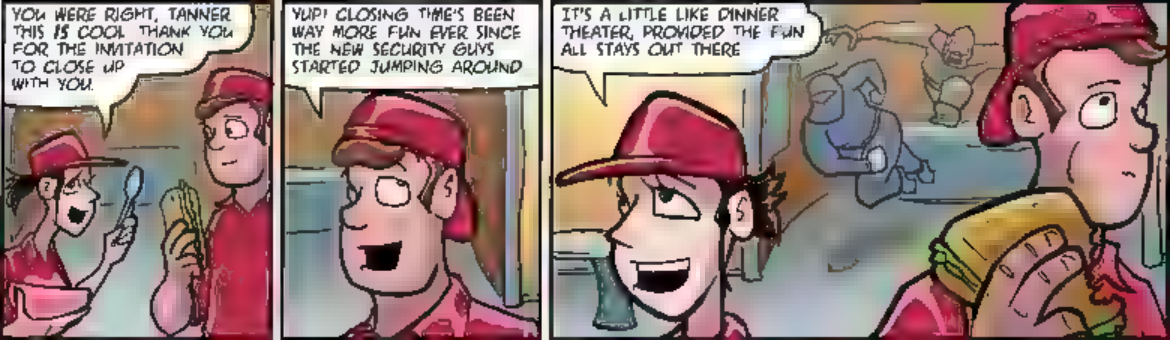

ARCHETYPE IS A POWERFUL FORCE IN HUMAN CULTURE
IN THEIR OWN MINDS HUMANS MAY BRIEFLY BECOME THE EPIC HEROES OF OLD. BEOWULF GILGAMESH. SUPERMAN
QUIT WIGGLING, OR I'LL GROUND-POUND YOU AGAIN


SHODAN! ANDY'S GOT ONE OF THE RUNNERS SUBDUED MASSEY'S ON CAMERA DUTY
I'VE GOT ANOTHER PINNED HERE MASSEY, FIND US THE REMAINING FIVE THEY DUCKED INTO HALLWAYS
NOT FIVE. SIX I JUST SPOTTED NICK CHASING KATHRYN
AND IT LOOKS LIKE SOMEBODY IS CHASING NICK


WAIT WHERE ARE THE OTHERS?
KATH'S TRYING TO PEEL BARRY'S PURSUIT MILO AND KOICHI ARE DOWN
THOSE RENT A-COPS ARE CHEATING SOMEHOW NO WAY DID THEY PICK UP THOSE SKILLS WITH JUST A WEEK OF TRAINING
I'M NOT SURE WE CAN CALL IT "CHEATING" SINCE WE DIDN'T LAY DOWN ANY RULES.
OKAY HERE'S A RULE IF YOU'RE BETTER THAN ME IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE CHEATING

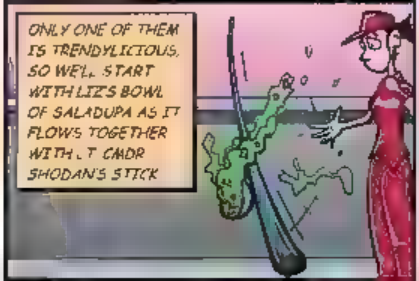

GRIPPONAN SMART SOLES DEFINITELY QUALIFY AS FORCE MULTIPLIER
WITH THE RIGHT SKILLS THEY ALLOW FOR AMAZING FEATS
DID YOU SEE THE CROWD THEY HAD GUARDING THE HUB?
SUCKERS. THEY'VE GOT NO WAY TO KNOW WE CAN SLIP OUT VIA THE RIM.
AND WITH THE RIGHT INTEL AMAZING FEATS BECOME LEGENDARY AMBUSHES


I'M COMING UP ON SZUPA. LOTS OF PURSUIT
PERFECT TANGLE EM UP THEN SCRAMBLE FOR EXTRACTION.
HURRY UP, YOU TWO. WE DO NOT HAVE MUCH TIME
YOU HAVE A LOT LESS TIME THAN YOU THINK


YOU WERE RIGHT, TANNER THIS IS COOL. THANK YOU FOR THE INVITATION TO CLOSE UP WITH YOU.
YUP! CLOSING TIME'S BEEN WAY MORE FUN EVER SINCE THE NEW SECURITY GUYS STARTED JUMPING AROUND
IT'S A LITTLE LIKE DINNER THEATER, PROVIDED THE FUN ALL STAYS OUT THERE

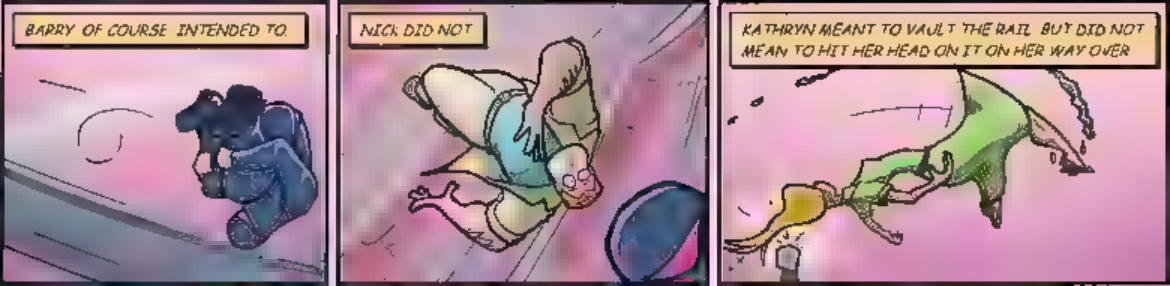
SZUPA'S MARKETING BOASTS "A CONFLUENCE OF TRENDYLICIOUS GENEGREDIENTS."

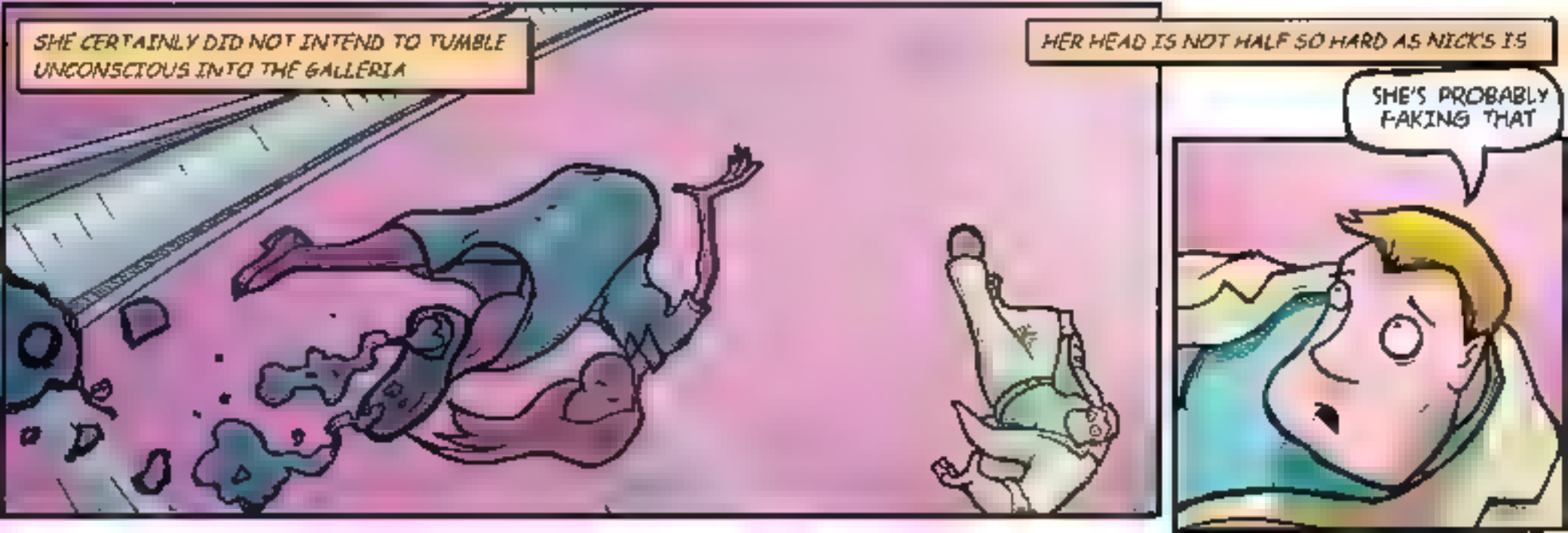
"CONFLUENCE" MEANS "FLOWING TOGETHER," AND AT THIS MOMENT SEVERAL THINGS ARE FLOWING TOGETHER AT SZUPA'S.

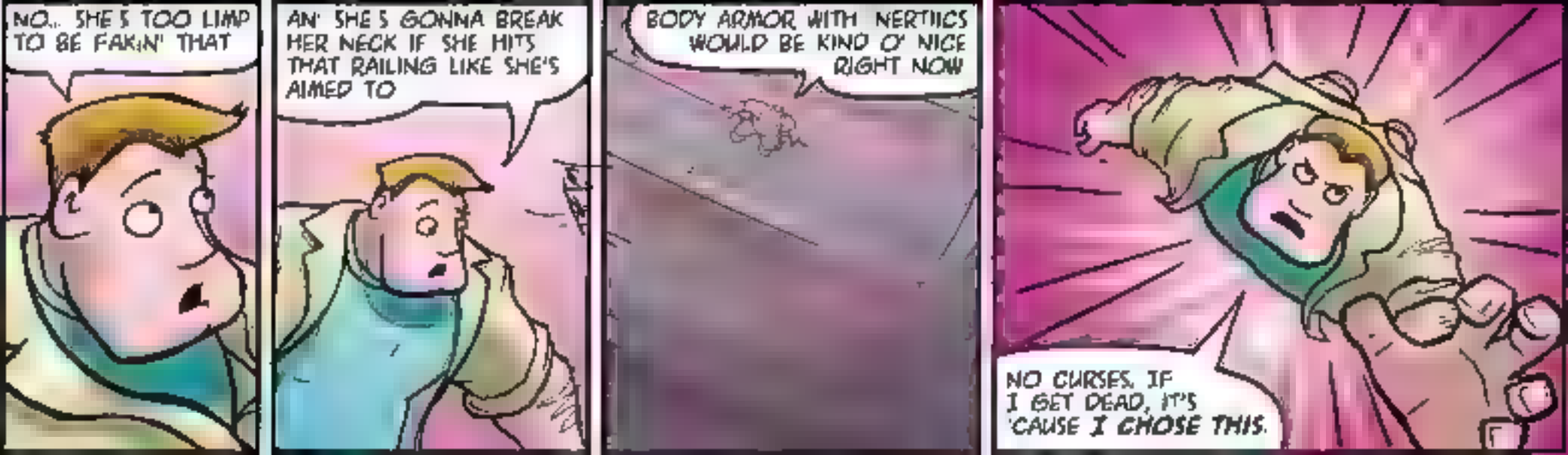

ONLY ONE OF THEM IS TRENDYLICIOUS, SO WE'LL START WITH LIZ'S BOWL OF SALADUPA AS IT FLOWS TOGETHER WITH LT CMDR SHODAN'S STICK



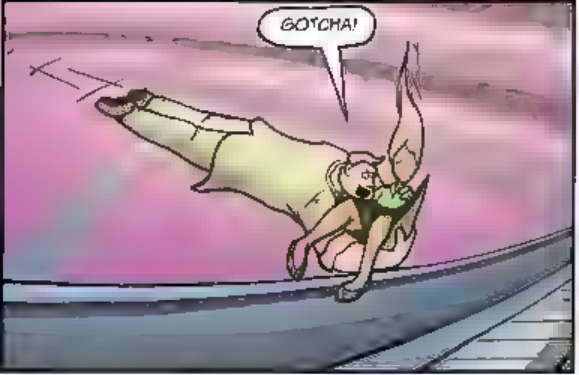

CHEF PANGOULE HURLS HIS PASTRY ROLLER AT KATHRYN
KATHRYN HITS THE SALADUPA PATCH ON THE FLOOR
MCONGER AND THE PASTRY ROLLER BOTH HIT NICK
AND BOTH LIZ AND TANNER SCREAM AS THREE PEOPLE GO OVER THE RAIL


BARRY OF COURSE INTENDED TO
NICK DID NOT
KATHRYN MEANT TO VAULT THE RAIL BUT DID NOT MEAN TO HIT HER HEAD ON IT ON HER WAY OVER


SHE CERTAINLY DID NOT INTEND TO TUMBLE UNCONSCIOUS INTO THE GALLERIA
HER HEAD IS NOT HALF SO HARD AS NICK'S IS
SHE'S PROBABLY FAKING THAT

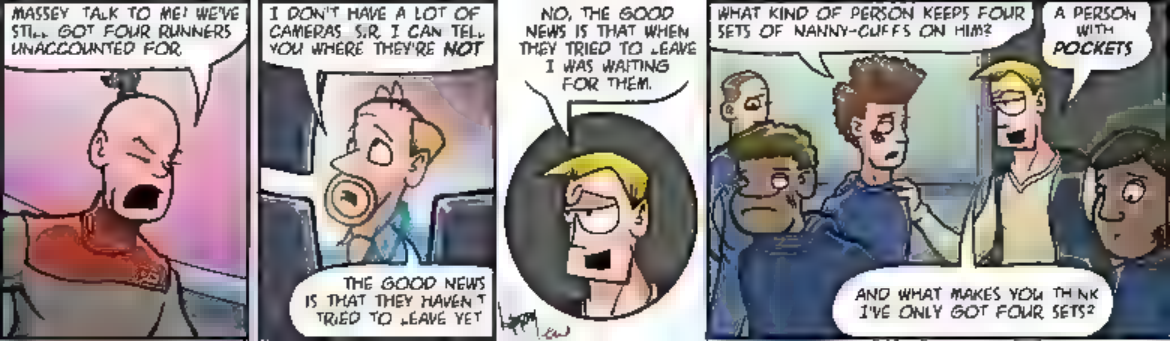

NO... SHE'S TOO LIMP TO BE FAKIN' THAT
AN' SHE'S GONNA BREAK HER NECK IF SHE HITS THAT RAILING LIKE SHE'S AIMED TO
BODY ARMOR WITH NERTICS WOULD BE KIND O' NICE RIGHT NOW
NO CURSES. IF I GET DEAD, IT'S 'CAUSE I CHOSE THIS.

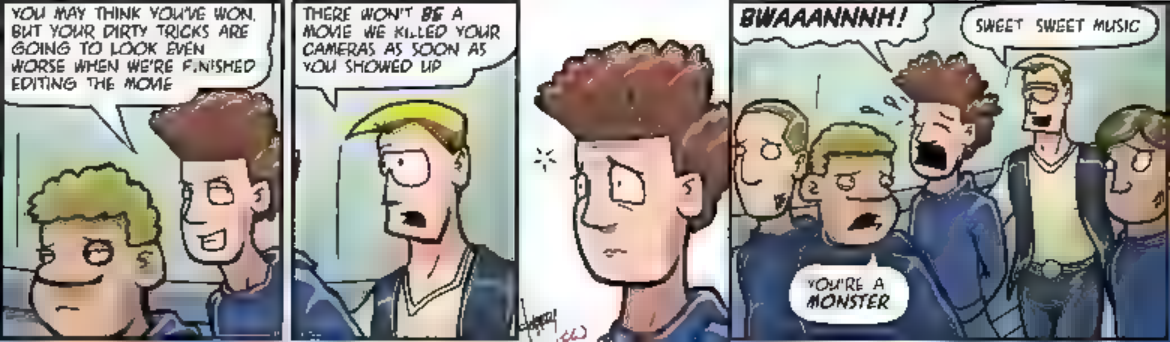

WAY TO GO, KATH! THE MONKEY GOT HUNG ON THE RAIL AND YOUR BOYFRIEND 'S CHASING AFTER YOU INSTEAD OF ME!
WHEN YOU TAKE ONE FOR THE TEAM YOU REALLY
TAKE?
YES. TAKE BUT IN THIS CASE "TAKE-DOWN"

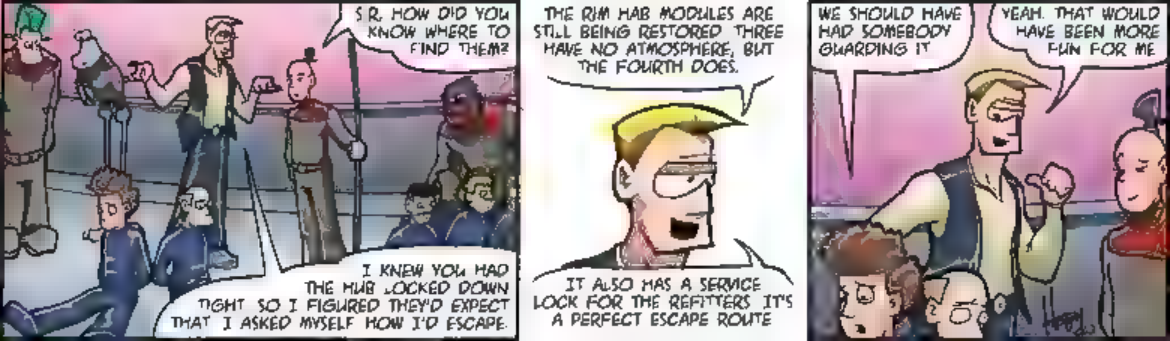

GOTCHA!

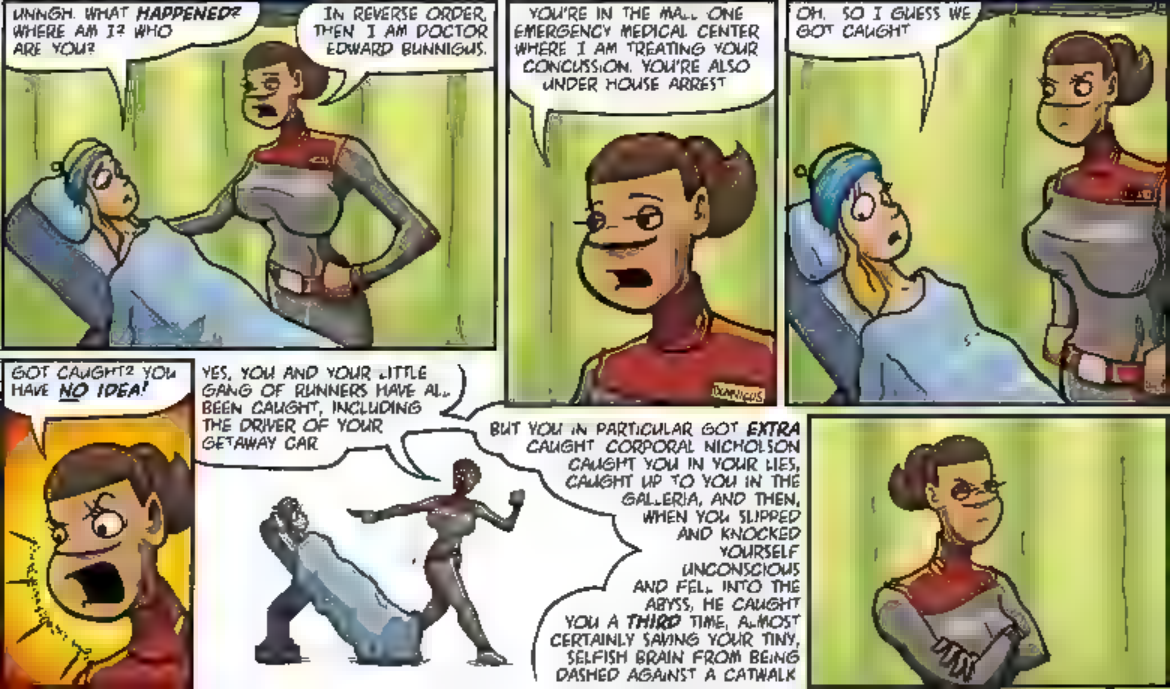

KRASH!!!


THAT WASN'T ONE O' THEM HYSTERICAL BULKHEADS WAS .T2

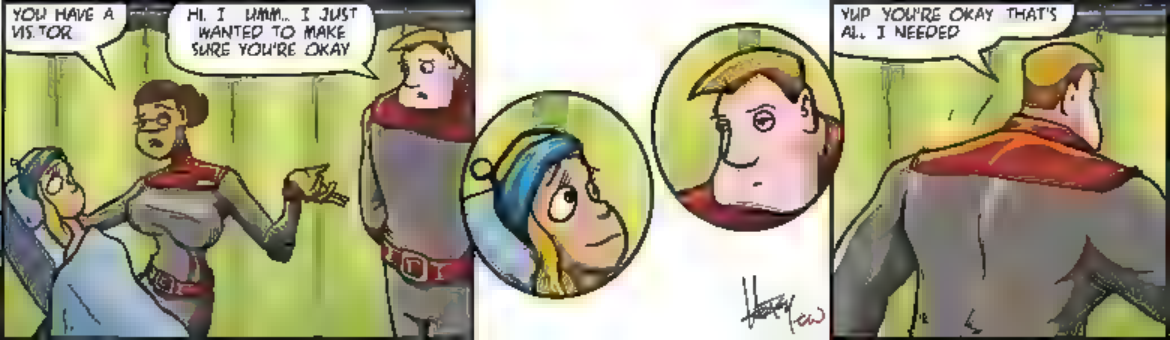

MASSEY TALK TO ME! WE'VE STILL GOT FOUR RUNNERS UNACCOUNTED FOR.
I DON'T HAVE A LOT OF CAMERAS SIR I CAN TELL YOU WHERE THEY'RE NOT
THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT THEY HAVEN'T TRIED TO LEAVE YET
NO, THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT WHEN THEY TRIED TO LEAVE I WAS WAITING FOR THEM.
WHAT KIND OF PERSON KEEPS FOUR SETS OF NANNY-CUFFS ON HIM?
A PERSON WITH POCKETS
AND WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I'VE ONLY GOT FOUR SETS?

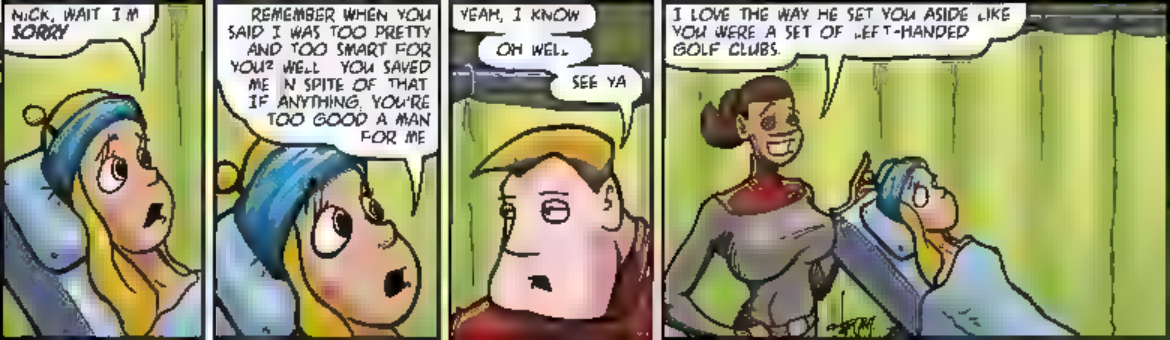

YOU MAY THINK YOU'VE WON, BUT YOUR DIRTY TRICKS ARE GOING TO LOOK EVEN WORSE WHEN WE'RE FINISHED EDITING THE MOVIE
THERE WON'T BE A MOVIE WE KILLED YOUR CAMERAS AS SOON AS YOU SHOWED UP
BWAAANNNH!
SWEET SWEET MUSIC
YOU'RE A MONSTER


S.R. HOW DID YOU KNOW WHERE TO FIND THEM?
I KNEW YOU HAD THE HUB LOCKED DOWN TIGHT SO I FIGURED THEY'D EXPECT THAT I ASKED MYSELF HOW I'D ESCAPE.
THE RIM HAB MODULES ARE STILL BEING RESTORED. THREE HAVE NO ATMOSPHERE, BUT THE FOURTH DOES.
IT ALSO HAS A SERVICE LOCK FOR THE REFITTERS. IT'S A PERFECT ESCAPE ROUTE
WE SHOULD HAVE HAD SOMEBODY GUARDING IT
YEAH. THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN MORE FUN FOR ME


UNNGH. WHAT HAPPENED? WHERE AM I? WHO ARE YOU?
IN REVERSE ORDER, THEN I AM DOCTOR EDWARD BUNNIGUS.
YOU'RE IN THE MALL ONE EMERGENCY MEDICAL CENTER WHERE I AM TREATING YOUR CONCUSSION. YOU'RE ALSO UNDER HOUSE ARREST
OH. SO I GUESS WE GOT CAUGHT
BUNNIGUS
GOT CAUGHT? YOU HAVE NO IDEA!
YES, YOU AND YOUR LITTLE GANG OF RUNNERS HAVE ALL BEEN CAUGHT, INCLUDING THE DRIVER OF YOUR GETAWAY CAR
BUT YOU IN PARTICULAR GOT EXTRA CAUGHT. CORPORAL NICHOLSON CAUGHT YOU IN YOUR LIES, CAUGHT UP TO YOU IN THE GALLERIA, AND THEN, WHEN YOU SLIPPED AND KNOCKED YOURSELF UNCONSCIOUS AND FELL INTO THE ABYSS, HE CAUGHT YOU A THIRD TIME, ALMOST CERTAINLY SAVING YOUR TINY, SELFISH BRAIN FROM BEING DASHED AGAINST A CATWALK


IS NICKY OKAY?
CORPORAL NICHOLSON BROKE YOUR FALL WITH HIS BODY AND A BULKHEAD THE BULKHEAD IS A COMPLETE LOSS.
I FORCED HIM TO SIT STILL FOR A FULL SCAN HE CAN'T HIDE INJURIES FROM ME THAT WAY
HE MAY STILL BE HIDING A BROKEN HEART HIPPOCRATES HELP ME, I WOULD LOVE TO HIDE YOUR PAINKILLERS.


YOU HAVE A VIS'TOR
HI. I UMM.. I JUST WANTED TO MAKE SURE YOU'RE OKAY
YUP YOU'RE OKAY THAT'S ALL I NEEDED

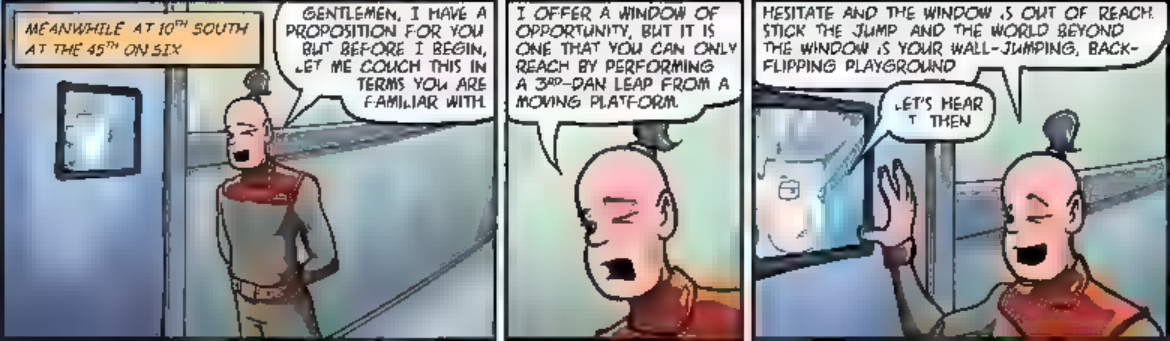

NICK, WAIT I M SORRY
REMEMBER WHEN YOU SAID I WAS TOO PRETTY AND TOO SMART FOR YOU? WELL YOU SAVED ME N SPITE OF THAT IF ANYTHING, YOU'RE TOO GOOD A MAN FOR ME
YEAH, I KNOW
OH WELL
SEE YA
I LOVE THE WAY HE SET YOU ASIDE LIKE YOU WERE A SET OF LEFT-HANDED GOLF CLUBS.


I thought you hated that uniform, Captain.
THIS .S THE UNIFORM SHODAN AND THE TROOPS WERE WEARING DURING THE EVENING'S EXC TEMENT
SO. IT'S THE UNIFORM I M GOING TO WEAR WHEN I TAKE THE HEAT FOR WHATEVER DAMAGE WAS DONE
"Dressing out for a dressing down," then?
THAT'S PITHY, BUT I'D LIKE IT MORE IF IT DIDN'T SMELL LIKE A PUN


HELLO. MISTER ALISS. I SUSPECT YOU WANT TO TALK TO ME?
YOU SUSPECT? WHAT IS OF THE SUSPECTING?
YOU KNOW MISTER ALISS. MOST OF MY CLIENTS ARE PARANOID TO SOME DEGREE
YOU'VE GOT A FULL 360-DEGREE ROTATION GOING ON
FULL ROTATION IS INSUFFICIENTLY OBSERVING. THERE MUST BE LOOKINGS UP AND DOWN!


ALISS. I KNOW YOU'RE HIDING SOMETHING FROM ME IN THIS LINE OF WORK THAT HAPPENS A LOT I'M USED TO IT
BUT YOU'RE SO SKITTISH YOU'RE MAKING ME NERVOUS. THAT MEANS I HAVE TO KNOW MORE
I GET THE CONCEPT OF "NEED TO KNOW" SO I'LL ONLY ASK FOR WHAT I NEED TO KNOW.
HERE'S MY QUESTION: DOES YOUR SECRET POSE A DANGER TO ME OR MY TROOPS?
OH, DEEPNESS NO! MY SECRET WOULD BE THE KILLING OF ME
PERFECT AS LONG AS THE SECRET ISN'T "I CAN'T PAY YOU" THEN I'VE GOT EVERYTHING I NEED

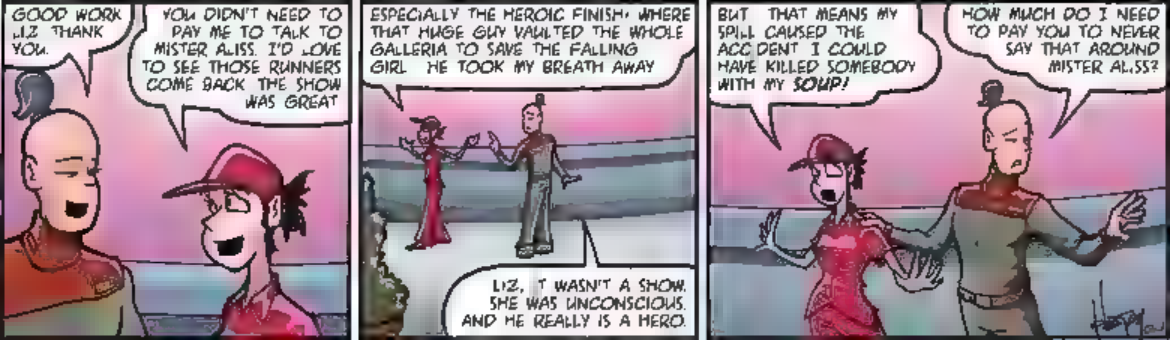

THE WALL THAT CORPORAL NICHOLSON TUMBLED THROUGH WAS NOT ONE OF YOUR HISTORICAL BULKHEADS, SO I THINK WE'RE ALMOST DONE HERE
WE JUST NEED TO DECIDE HOW TO DISPOSE OF THE RUNNERS WE'VE GOT IN THE BRIG
DISPOSE? IS THIS A EUPHEMISM BEING OMINOUS?
ALSO, A BRIG? WHERE ARE WE HAVING A BRIG?
PICK ANY FOUR BULKHEADS WITH A STURDY DOOR
IT'S BETTER IF THERE'S A TOILET INSIDE WE COMMANDEERED THE RESTROOM AT THE 45TH ON SIX


MEANWHILE AT 10TH SOUTH AT THE 45TH ON SIX
GENTLEMEN, I HAVE A PROPOSITION FOR YOU BUT BEFORE I BEGIN, LET ME COUCH THIS IN TERMS YOU ARE FAMILIAR WITH.
I OFFER A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY, BUT IT IS ONE THAT YOU CAN ONLY REACH BY PERFORMING A 3RD-DAN LEAP FROM A MOVING PLATFORM.
HESITATE AND THE WINDOW IS OUT OF REACH. STICK THE JUMP AND THE WORLD BEYOND THE WINDOW IS YOUR WALL-JUMPING, BACK-FLIPPING PLAYGROUND
LET'S HEAR T THEN

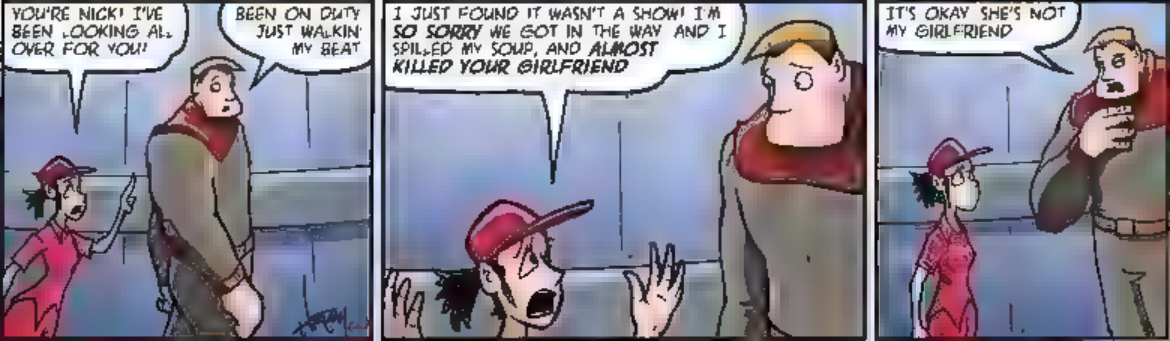

I KNOW WHY YOU CAME TO MALL-ONE THIS .S THE LAST PUBLICLY ACCESS BLE ROTATING REFERENCE FRAME IN SOL SYSTEM. THE SPINNING GARDENS OF BABYLON FIVE DON'T COUNT BECAUSE ALL PUBLIC ACCESS THERE IS CONTAINED N FOREST-FRIENDLY CATWALKS
YOU WANTED TO ENJOY THE THRILL OF PARKATA URBATSU IN AN ENVIRONMENT THAT MODERN GRAVITICS HAS RENDERED COMPLETELY UNIQUE.
YOU ALSO HOPED TO MAKE GOOD MONEY FROM THE FOOTAGE OF YOUR BIG CHASE LAST NIGHT
HAD MY TROOPS AND I BEEN JUST THE TINIEST BIT LESS COMPETENT, YOU'D HAVE PULLED IT OFF. YOU'RE QUITE GOOD
THANKS.
SADLY, YOU WERE NOT QUITE GOOD ENOUGH

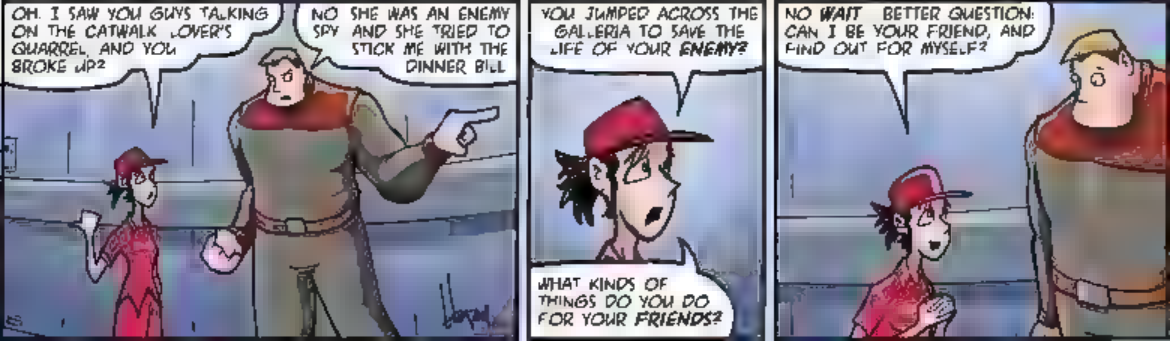

OH, A LEFT-HANDED COMPLIMENT. LOOK, BOYS, HE'S AMBIDEXTROUS.
ACTUALLY I AM
ON TO THE PROPOSITION: I WILL OFFER YOU THE OPPORTUNITY TO RUN, JUMP, AND PLAY HERE AT MALL-ONE, AND TO GET PAID FOR IT
YOU WILL LEARN SOME NEW TRICKS, AND YOU WILL ACCEPT THE AUTHORITY OF AN EMPLOYER
IT SOUNDS LIKE A SWEET DEAL, BUT MANAGEMENT HERE IS STODGY AND YOU'RE JUST THE SECURITY CONTRACTOR.
PARKATA URBATSU IS FAR FROM BEING MY ONLY MARTIAL ART
ON YOUR BEHALF I SHALL NOW EXERCISE THE WIN/WIN KATA FROM -DAN CONVERSATIONAL JUDO.

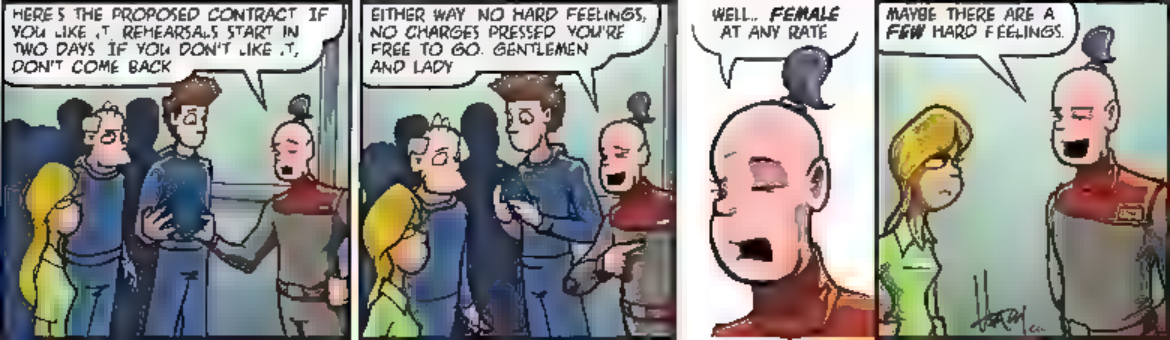

YOU CAN PRESS CHARGES BUT I DOUBT THEY'LL DO ANY JAIL TIME
THERE WILL BE RESTRAININGS, YES? THEY CANNOT COME BACK HERE TO BE ENDANGERED OF THEMSELVES!
MISTER ALISS' CAN I BOTHER YOU, SIR?
THE RUNNERS LAST NIGHT THAT REHEARSAL WAS BRILLIANT MY BOSS WANTS TO KNOW WHEN THE SHOW IS. AND WHETHER HE CAN SELL TICKETS FOR SEATS ON OUR MEZZANINE
MAYBE YOU COULD JUST DEMAND COMMUNITY SERVICE


GOOD WORK LIZ. THANK YOU.
YOU DIDN'T NEED TO PAY ME TO TALK TO MISTER ALISS. I'D LOVE TO SEE THOSE RUNNERS COME BACK THE SHOW WAS GREAT
ESPECIALLY THE HEROIC FINISH, WHERE THAT HUGE GUY VAULTED THE WHOLE GALLERIA TO SAVE THE FALLING GIRL. HE TOOK MY BREATH AWAY
LIZ, IT WASN'T A SHOW. SHE WAS UNCONSCIOUS. AND HE REALLY IS A HERO.
BUT THAT MEANS MY SPILL CAUSED THE ACCIDENT. I COULD HAVE KILLED SOMEBODY WITH MY SOUP!
HOW MUCH DO I NEED TO PAY YOU TO NEVER SAY THAT AROUND MISTER ALISS?

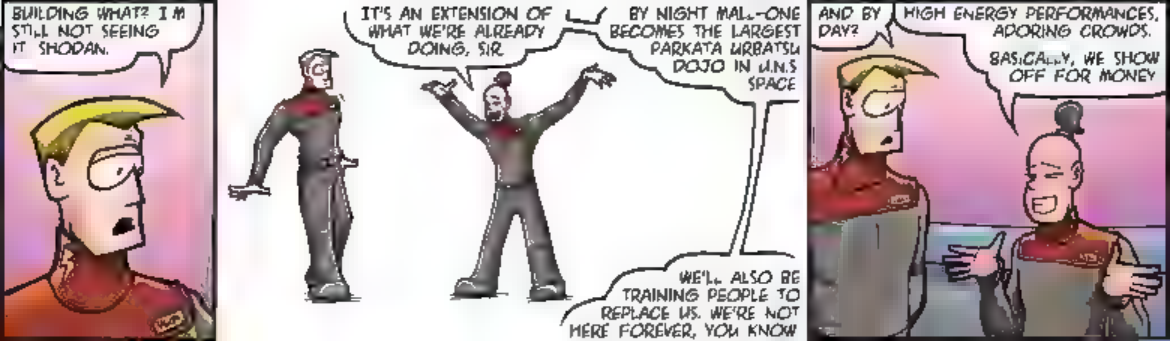

MISTER ALISS, I THINK YOU'VE GOT A RARE OPPORTUNITY HERE
YOU HAVE A TEAM OF ENTERTAINERS WHOSE WORK IS PERFECTLY SUITED FOR YOUR VENUE
MY VENUE DOES NOT NEED ENDANGERINGS FOR PROFIT!
THAT WALL NICK CRASHED THROUGH WAS EMPTY STOREFRONT YOU'VE GOT OVER THIRTY OF THOSE IN THE GALLERIA ALONE.
IN CORPORATE PARLANCE, FAILURE TO ATTEMPT TO FILL THOSE STORES WOULD BE FISCAL IRRESPONSIBILITY
THERE MUST BE INDEMNITY AND CONTRACTS AND
WE'RE MERCENARIES, MISTER ALISS. OUR ATTORNEY IS QUITE GOOD AT INDEMNITY


YOU'RE NICK! I'VE BEEN LOOKING AL OVER FOR YOU!
BEEN ON DUTY JUST WALKIN' MY BEAT
I JUST FOUND IT WASN'T A SHOW! I'M SO SORRY WE GOT IN THE WAY AND I SPILLED MY SOUP, AND ALMOST KILLED YOUR GIRLFRIEND
IT'S OKAY SHE'S NOT MY GIRLFRIEND

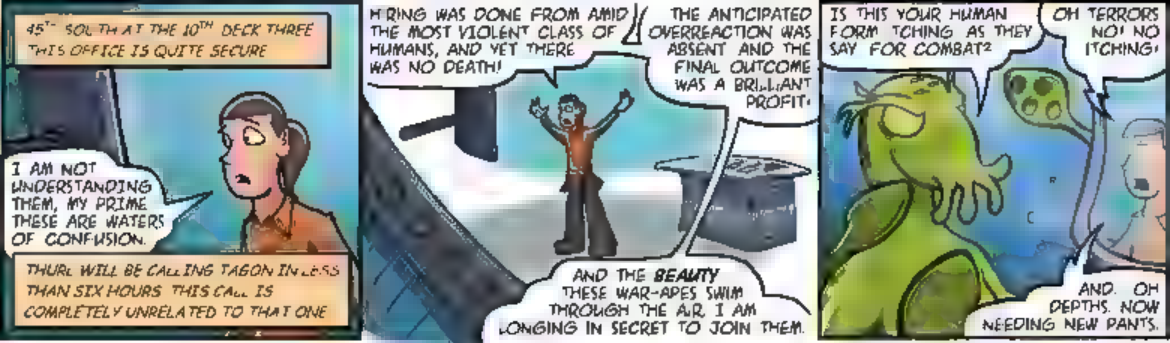

OH. I SAW YOU GUYS TALKING ON THE CATWALK. LOVER'S QUARREL AND YOU BROKE UP?
NO SHE WAS AN ENEMY SPY AND SHE TRIED TO STICK ME WITH THE DINNER BILL
YOU JUMPED ACROSS THE GALLERIA TO SAVE THE LIFE OF YOUR ENEMY?
WHAT KINDS OF THINGS DO YOU DO FOR YOUR FRIENDS?
NO WAIT BETTER QUESTION: CAN I BE YOUR FRIEND, AND FIND OUT FOR MYSELF?

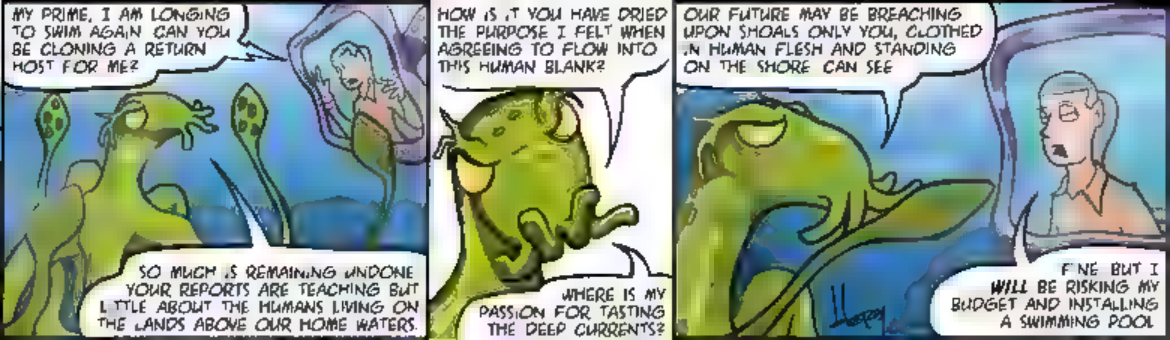

HERE'S THE PROPOSED CONTRACT IF YOU LIKE IT REHEARSALS START IN TWO DAYS IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, DON'T COME BACK
EITHER WAY NO HARD FEELINGS, NO CHARGES PRESSED YOU'RE FREE TO GO. GENTLEMEN AND LADY
WELL.. FEMALE AT ANY RATE
MAYBE THERE ARE A FEW HARD FEELINGS.


SHODAN, WHAT'S OUR ANGLE HERE?
SORRY SIR. I SHOULD HAVE BRIEFED YOU BUT I NEEDED TO MOVE QUICKLY BEFORE THE OPPORTUNITY PASSED
WHAT OPPORTUNITY? IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE FINDING JOBS FOR THE ENEMY
I AM SIR, WE'RE OVERQUALIFIED FOR THIS AND WE'RE SHORT TIMING
WHAT IF, FOR AT LEAST THE NEXT COUPLE OF WEEKS, WE PUT ALL OUR LIFE-OR-DEATH EXPERTISE AND ENERGY INTO BUILDING SOMETHING WONDERFUL.. SOMETHING THAT WILL OUTLAST OUR STAY HERE?

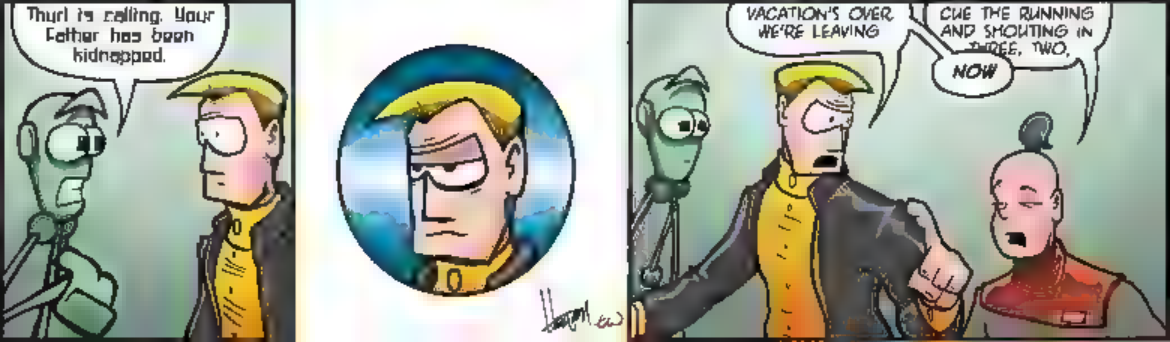

BUILDING WHAT? I M STI.L NOT SEEING IT SHODAN.
IT'S AN EXTENSION OF WHAT WE'RE ALREADY DOING, SIR.
BY NIGHT MAL-ONE BECOMES THE LARGEST PARKATA URBATSU DOJO IN U.N.S SPACE
WE'L. ALSO BE TRAINING PEOPLE TO REPLACE US. WE'RE NOT HERE FOREVER, YOU KNOW
AND BY DAY?
HIGH ENERGY PERFORMANCES, ADORING CROWDS.
BASICALLY, WE SHOW OFF FOR MONEY

THE ONLY REAL DANGER IS THAT WE COULD GET USED TO T

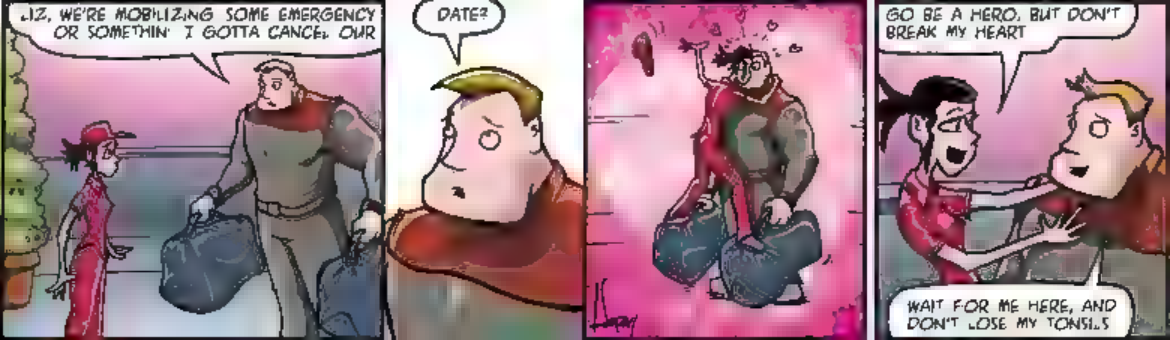

45TH SOUTH AT THE 10TH DECK THREE
THIS OFFICE IS QUITE SECURE
I AM NOT UNDERSTANDING THEM, MY PRIME THESE ARE WATERS OF CONFUSION.
THURL WILL BE CALLING TAGON IN LESS THAN SIX HOURS THIS CALL IS COMPLETELY UNRELATED TO THAT ONE
H'RING WAS DONE FROM AMID THE MOST VIOLENT CLASS OF HUMANS, AND YET THERE WAS NO DEATH!
THE ANTICIPATED OVERREACTION WAS ABSENT AND THE FINAL OUTCOME WAS A BRILLIANT PROFIT.
AND THE BEAUTY THESE WAR-APES SWIM THROUGH THE AIR I AM LONGING IN SECRET TO JOIN THEM.
IS THIS YOUR HUMAN FORM TCHING AS THEY SAY FOR COMBAT?
OH TERRORS NO! NO ITCHING!
AND, OH DEPTHS. NOW NEEDING NEW PANTS.


MY PRIME, I AM LONGING TO SWIM AGAIN. CAN YOU BE CLONING A RETURN HOST FOR ME?
SO MUCH IS REMAINING UNDONE. YOUR REPORTS ARE TEACHING BUT LITTLE ABOUT THE HUMANS LIVING ON THE LANDS ABOVE OUR HOME WATERS.
HOW IS IT YOU HAVE DRIED THE PURPOSE I FELT WHEN AGREEING TO FLOW INTO THIS HUMAN BLANK?
WHERE IS MY PASSION FOR TASTING THE DEEP CURRENTS?
OUR FUTURE MAY BE BREACHING UPON SHOALS ONLY YOU, CLOTHED IN HUMAN FLESH AND STANDING ON THE SHORE CAN SEE
FINE BUT I WILL BE RISKING MY BUDGET AND INSTALLING A SWIMMING POOL

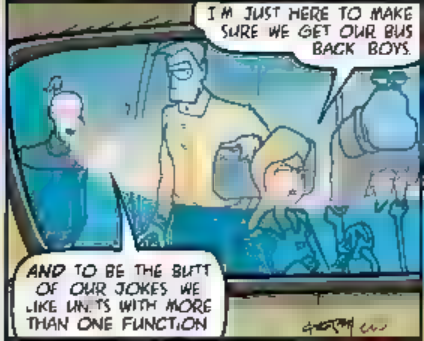

SHODAN, THANK YOU.
THESE LAST TWO WEEKS HAVE BEEN GREAT. THEY WERE RELAXING, BUT STILL PHYSICALLY DEMANDING
I CAN ALMOST IMAGINE MYSELF RETIRING TO A JOB LIKE THIS. NO LIFE-OR-DEATH EMERGENCIES, OR AT LEAST NOT VERY MANY. NOBODY SHOOTING AT ME. JUST ENOUGH EXCITEMENT TO KEEP ME SANE BUT NOT ENOUGH TO KILL ME
I'M NOT SURE I WANT TO LEAVE
Captain! There you are! You left your comm in your quarters.
SORRY. THAT WAS SLOPPY OF ME. WHAT'S GOING ON?


Thurl is calling. Your father has been kidnapped.
VACATION'S OVER WE'RE LEAVING
CUE THE RUNNING AND SHOUTING IN THREE, TWO,
NOW


I'VE SENT YOU THE BRIEFING, SIR. THE NEXT SHUTTLE LEAVES IN TWO HOURS. IT'S NOT A DIRECT TRIP BUT IT'S THE BEST COMMERCIAL TRANSPORT WE CAN GET ON SHORT NOTICE
FORGET COMMERCIAL TRANSPORT I'VE GOT MY GAME FACE ON.
I'm COMMANDEERING SOMETHING
WHOA, TAGON'S MAKING THAT FACE AGAIN. I'M GOING TO HIDE IN THE TOUR BUS

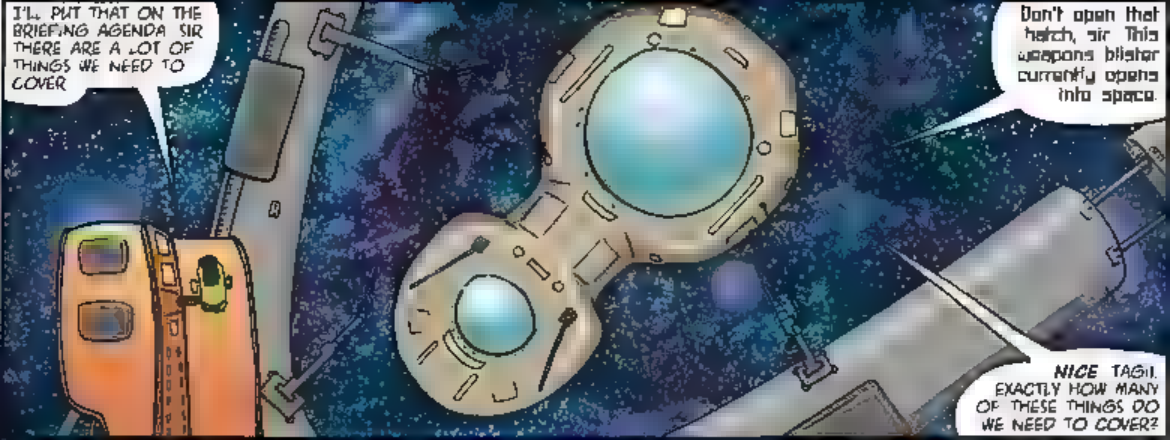

LIZ, WE'RE MOBILIZING SOME EMERGENCY OR SOMETHIN' I GOTTA CANCEL OUR
DATE?
GO BE A HERO. BUT DON'T BREAK MY HEART
WAIT FOR ME HERE, AND DON'T LOSE MY TONSILS

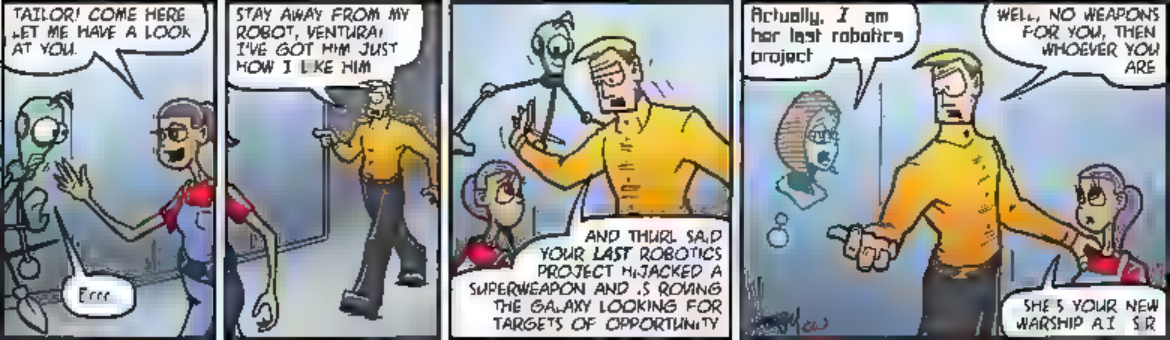

ALL PERSONNEL AND MATERIEL ARE PRESENT SIR
GOOD WORK SHODAN THAT TOOK TWENTY ONE MINUTES, BY MY CLOCK
A LITTLE SLOW I KNOW BUT WE HAD A COLD START AND NICK HAD TO GET THAT GOOD-BYE KISS WHILE YOU COMMANDEERED A BUS.
WE COULD HAVE SAVED A LITTLE TIME IF HE'D GOTTEN HIS KISS FROM THE BUS DRIVER

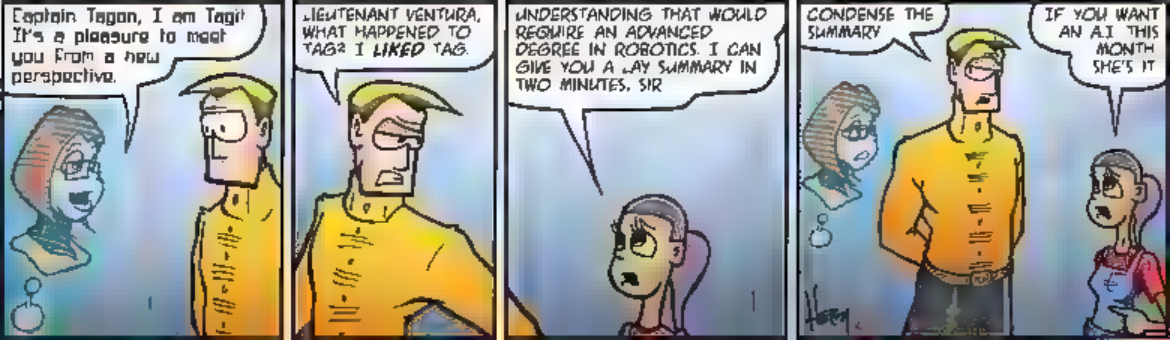

I'M JUST HERE TO MAKE SURE WE GET OUR BUS BACK BOYS.
AND TO BE THE BUTT OF OUR JOKES WE LIKE UNITS WITH MORE THAN ONE FUNCTION

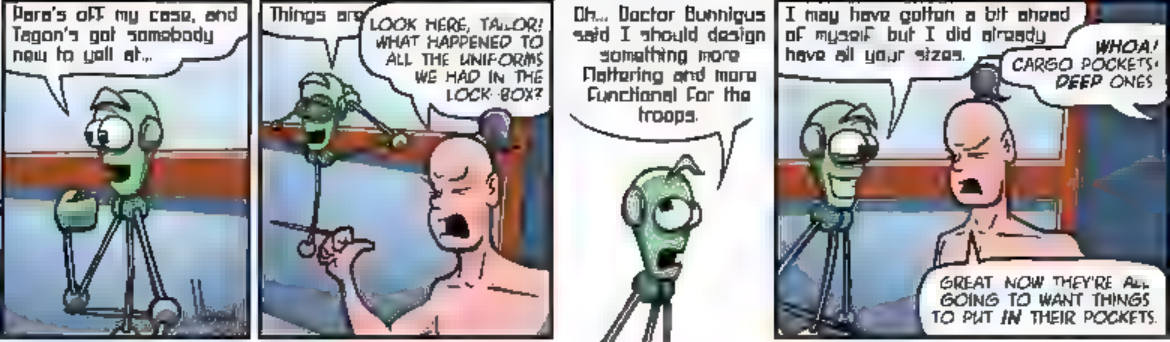

HIGH OLYMPUS SHIPYARDS
IN ORBIT ABOVE MARS
CAPTAIN ON DECK!
In a TUX? Where's Tegan, and what have you done with him?

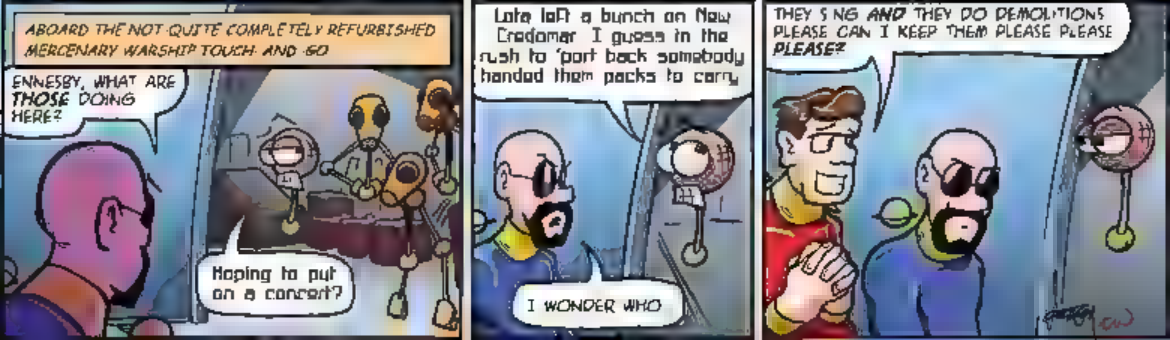

THURL, OFFICER'S BRIEFING IN FIVE MINUTES.
MAKE IT TEN AND WE CAN MEET ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO
YEAH. ABOUT THAT
ON APPROACH MY SHIP LOOKED SHORTER
IF IT WASN'T THE ONLY SHIP HERE I WOULDN'T HAVE KNOWN IT WAS MINE

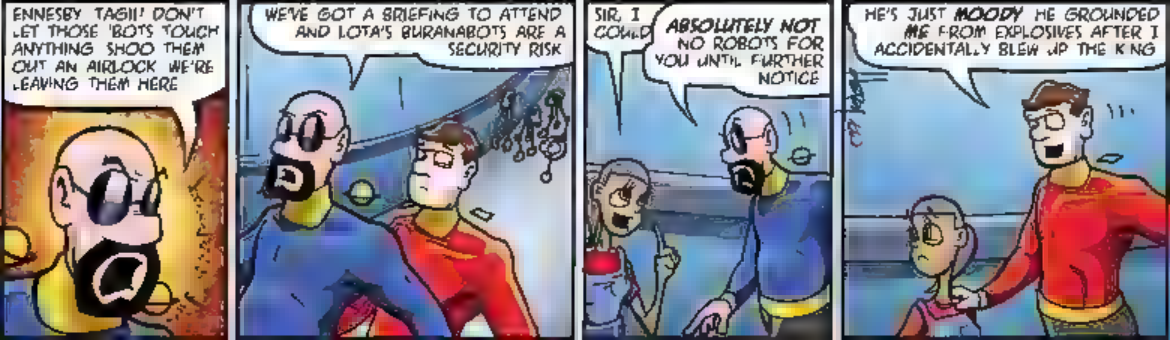

I'LL PUT THAT ON THE BRIEFING AGENDA SIR THERE ARE A LOT OF THINGS WE NEED TO COVER
Don't open that hatch, sir. This weapons blister currently opens into space.
NICE TAGU. EXACTLY HOW MANY OF THESE THINGS DO WE NEED TO COVER?


TAILOR! COME HERE LET ME HAVE A LOOK AT YOU.
Eeee
STAY AWAY FROM MY ROBOT, VENTURA! I'VE GOT HIM JUST HOW I LIKE HIM
AND THURL SAID YOUR LAST ROBOTICS PROJECT HIJACKED A SUPERWEAPON AND IS ROVING THE GALAXY LOOKING FOR TARGETS OF OPPORTUNITY
Actually, I am her last robotics project
WELL, NO WEAPONS FOR YOU, THEN WHOEVER YOU ARE
SHE'S YOUR NEW WARSHIP A.I. SIR


Captain Tagon, I am Tag! It's a pleasure to meet you from a new perspective.
LIEUTENANT VENTURA, WHAT HAPPENED TO TAG? I LIKED TAG.
UNDERSTANDING THAT WOULD REQUIRE AN ADVANCED DEGREE IN ROBOTICS. I CAN GIVE YOU A LAY SUMMARY IN TWO MINUTES, SIR
CONDENSE THE SUMMARY
IF YOU WANT AN A.I. THIS MONTH SHE'S IT

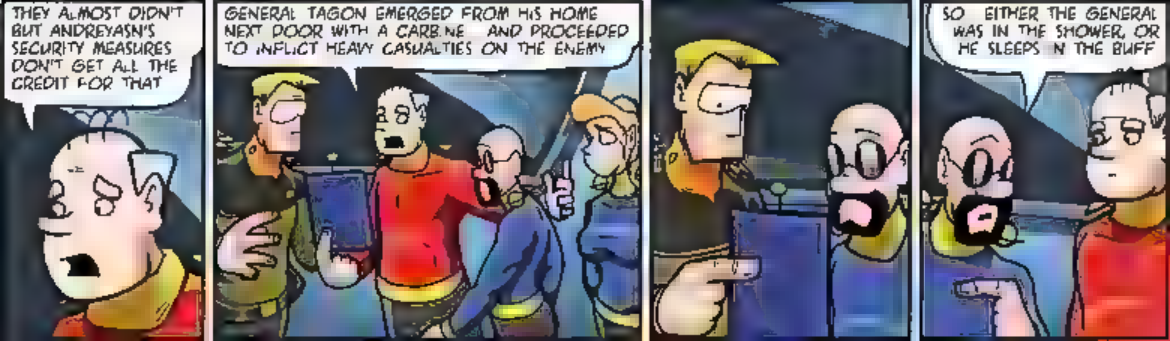

Para's off my case, and Tagon's got somebody now to yell at...
Things are
LOOK HERE, TAILOR! WHAT HAPPENED TO ALL THE UNIFORMS WE HAD IN THE LOCK-BOX?
Oh... Doctor Bunnigus said I should design something more flattering and more functional for the troops.
I may have gotten a bit ahead of myself but I did already have all your sizes.
WHOA! CARGO POCKETS? DEEP ONES
GREAT NOW THEY'RE ALL GOING TO WANT THINGS TO PUT IN THEIR POCKETS.


ABOARD THE NOT QUITE COMPLETELY REFURBISHED MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH AND GO
ENNESBY, WHAT ARE THOSE DOING HERE?
Hoping to put on a concert?
Late left a bunch on New Crodomar I guess in the rush to 'port back somebody handed them packs to carry
I WONDER WHO
THEY SING AND THEY DO DEMOLITIONS PLEASE CAN I KEEP THEM PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE?

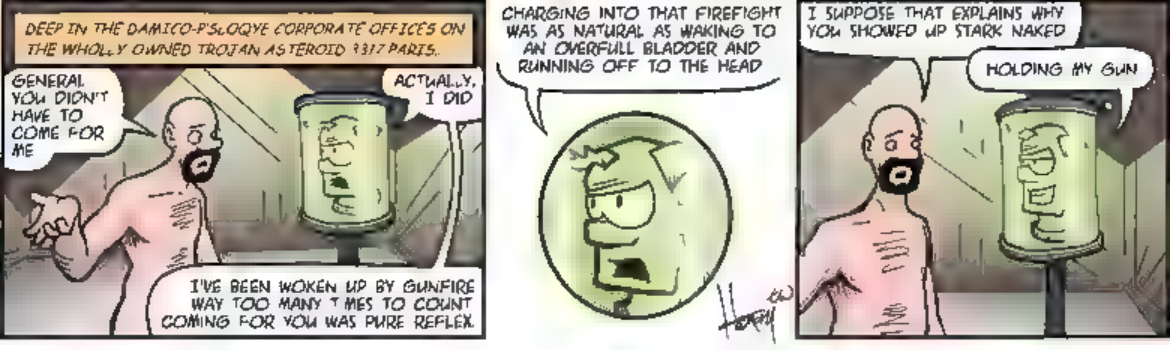

ENNESBY TAGII! DON'T LET THOSE 'BOTS TOUCH ANYTHING SHOO THEM OUT AN AIRLOCK WE'RE LEAVING THEM HERE
WE'VE GOT A BRIEFING TO ATTEND AND LOTA'S BURANABOTS ARE A SECURITY RISK
SIR, I COULD
ABSOLUTELY NOT NO ROBOTS FOR YOU UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE
HE'S JUST MOODY HE GROUNDED ME FROM EXPLOSIVES AFTER I ACCIDENTALLY BLEW UP THE KING

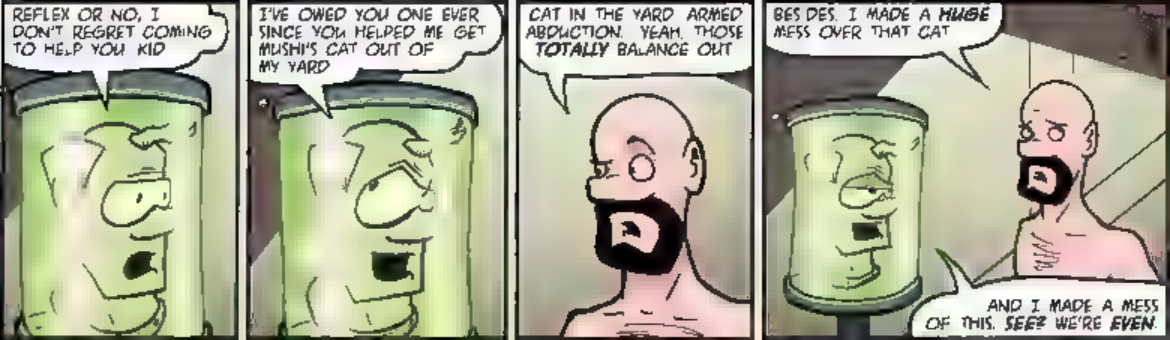

EN ROUTE TO A BRIEFING
SO.. YOU GOT NEW CLOTHES?
TAILOR DID UNIFORMS FOR BOTH MY PLATOONS. IT WAS A SURPRISE TO ME.
THAT STITCHING IS ARTFUL. HE'S PUT HIS SIGNATURE UP AND DOWN ALL THE SEAMS
I'VE HAD IT ON FOR ALL OF THREE MINUTES AND IT FEELS LIKE AN OLD FRIEND
WAIT. YOU CAN READ THE STITCHES IN THE NANOWEAVE?
HANG ON. HOW EXACTLY DO YOU FEEL YOUR OLD FRIENDS?

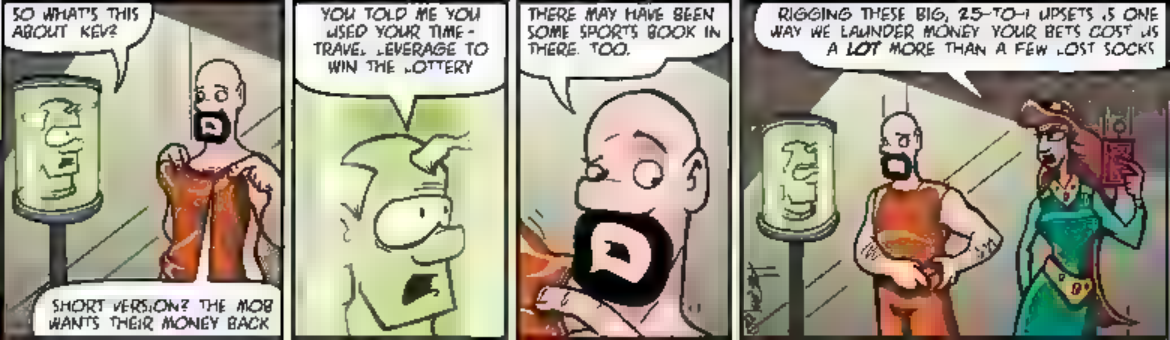

BRIEFING IN PROGRESS ABOARD THE TOUCH AND GO
SIX HOURS AGO, AT TWO A.M THEIR TIME CAPTAIN KEVYN ANDREYASN AND GENERAL KARL TAGON WERE ABDUCTED
ANDREYASN HAD QUITE THE HOME SECURITY SYSTEM. WE'VE GOT FOOTAGE FROM THE INCIDENT SHOWING SIGNIFICANT RETURN FIRE ALSO, HIS DISTRESS CALL INCLUDES A GENEROUS BOUNTY FOR HIS RESCUE THAT'S WHERE WE COME IN
THAT SOUNDS LIKE MY TIME-CLONE THOUGH I AM A LITTLE SURPRISED THEY GOT HIM AT ALL


THEY ALMOST DIDN'T BUT ANDREYASN'S SECURITY MEASURES DON'T GET ALL THE CREDIT FOR THAT
GENERAL TAGON EMERGED FROM HIS HOME NEXT DOOR WITH A CARBINE AND PROCEEDED TO INFLICT HEAVY CASUALTIES ON THE ENEMY
SO EITHER THE GENERAL WAS IN THE SHOWER, OR HE SLEEPS IN THE BUFF

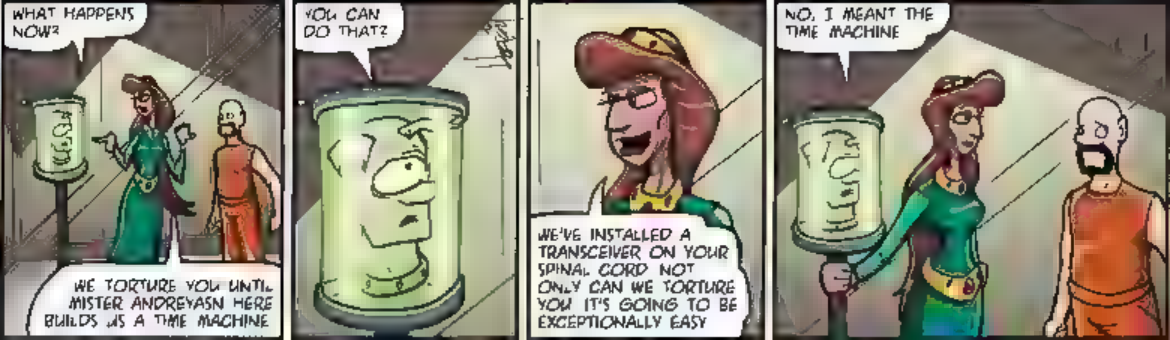

THAT CARBINE USED TO HANG BEHIND HIS DESK IN THE STUDY I THOUGHT IT WAS A SHOW PIECE
I GUESS I DON'T KNOW MY DAD ALL THAT WELL. BUT I DO KNOW ONE THING.
WHOEVER TOOK HIM ,S IN BIG TROUBLE EVEN UNARMED TIED DOWN, AND SEDATED GENERAL KARL TAGON S DANGEROUS
MEANWHILE
THAT'S A PRETTY EFFECTIVE SET OF RESTRAINTS, KARL
I'LL GET OUT OF EM, KEV JUST YOU WAIT

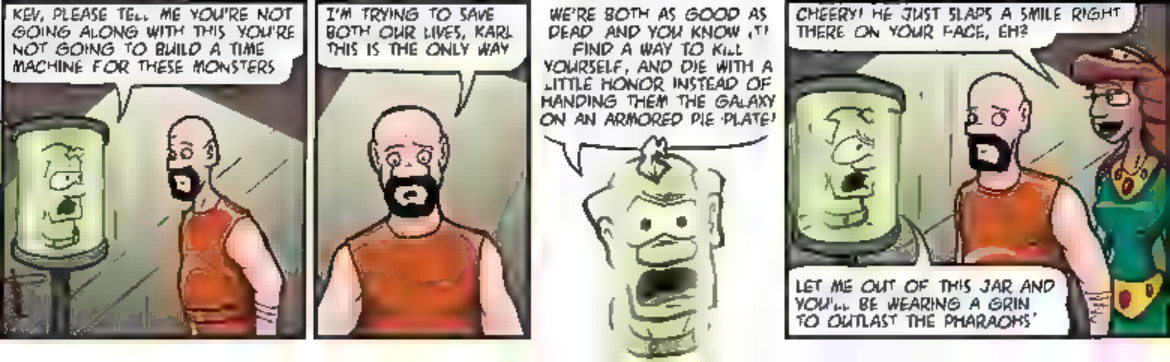

DEEP IN THE DAMICO-P'SLOQYE CORPORATE OFFICES ON THE WHOLLY OWNED TROJAN ASTEROID 9317 PARIS..
GENERAL YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO COME FOR ME
ACTUALLY, I DID
I'VE BEEN WOKEN UP BY GUNFIRE WAY TOO MANY T MES TO COUNT COMING FOR YOU WAS PURE REFLEX.
CHARGING INTO THAT FIREFIGHT WAS AS NATURAL AS WAKING TO AN OVERFULL BLADDER AND RUNNING OFF TO THE HEAD
I SUPPOSE THAT EXPLAINS WHY YOU SHOWED UP STARK NAKED
HOLDING MY GUN

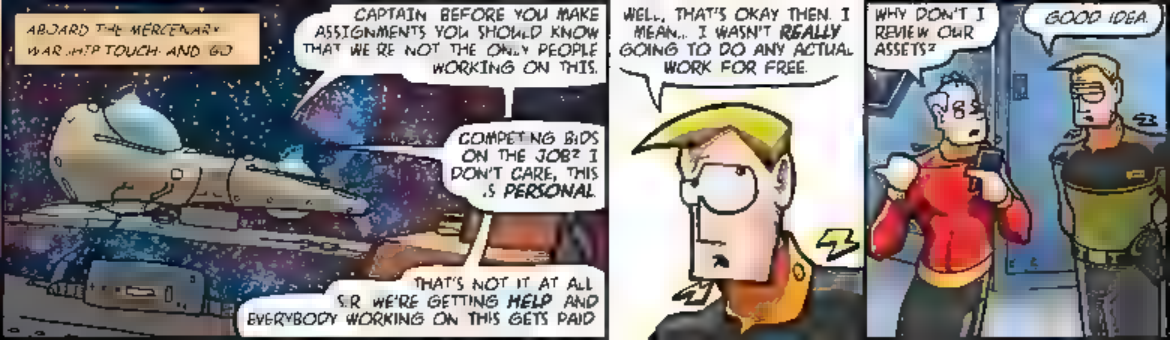

REFLEX OR NO, I DON'T REGRET COMING TO HELP YOU KID
I'VE OWED YOU ONE EVER SINCE YOU HELPED ME GET MUSHI'S CAT OUT OF MY YARD
CAT IN THE YARD. ARMED ABDUCTION. YEAH. THOSE TOTALLY BALANCE OUT
BES DES. I MADE A HUGE MESS OVER THAT CAT
AND I MADE A MESS OF THIS. SEE? WE'RE EVEN.

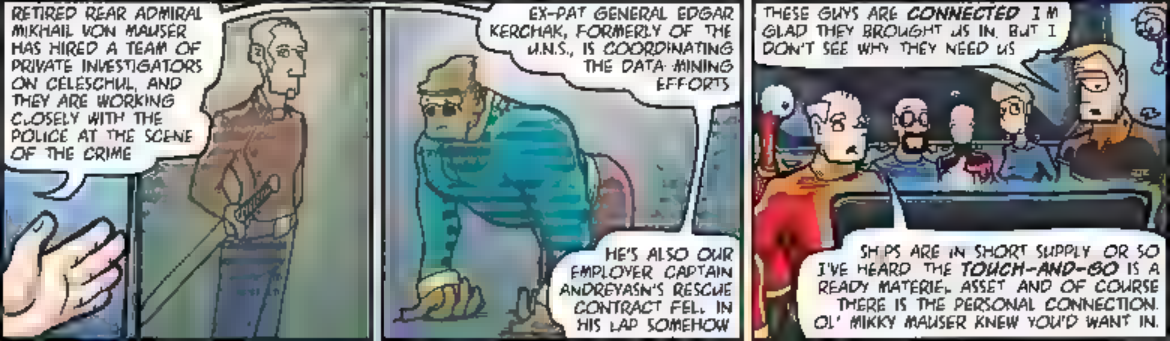

SO WHAT'S THIS ABOUT KEV?
SHORT VERSION? THE MOB WANTS THEIR MONEY BACK
YOU TOLD ME YOU USED YOUR TIME-TRAVEL LEVERAGE TO WIN THE LOTTERY
THERE MAY HAVE BEEN SOME SPORTS BOOK IN THERE. TOO.
RIGGING THESE BIG, 25-TO-1 UPSETS IS ONE WAY WE LAUNDER MONEY YOUR BETS COST US A LOT MORE THAN A FEW LOST SOCKS

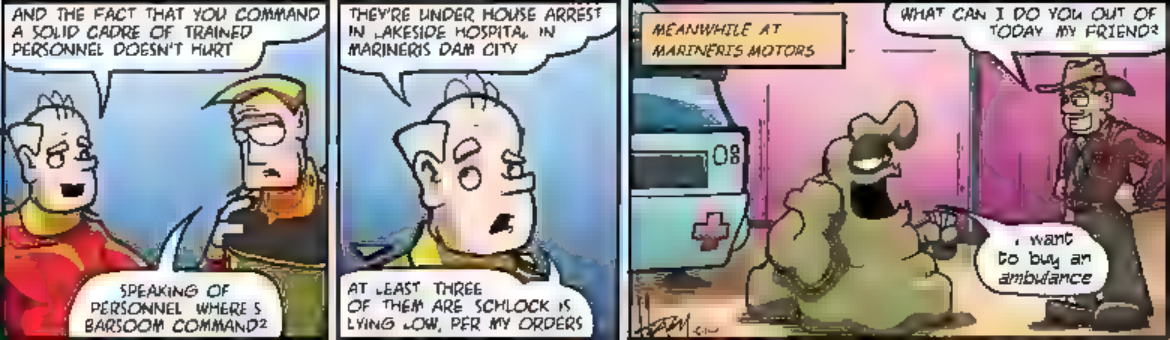

THEY KNOW ALL ABOUT THE TIME TRAVEL THING, GENERAL WE CAN SPEAK FREELY
HOW DID THEY FIND OUT?
EVERYBODY TALKS EVENTUALLY
THEY TORTURED YOU?
WELL... I KNOW THAT EVERYBODY TALKS EVENTUALLY SO I FIGURED I'D SAVE US ALL A LITTLE TIME


WHAT HAPPENS NOW?
WE TORTURE YOU UNTIL MISTER ANDREYASN HERE BUILDS US A TIME MACHINE
YOU CAN DO THAT?
WE'VE INSTALLED A TRANSCEIVER ON YOUR SPINAL CORD NOT ONLY CAN WE TORTURE YOU IT'S GOING TO BE EXCEPTIONALLY EASY
NO, I MEANT THE TIME MACHINE


KEV, PLEASE TELL ME YOU'RE NOT GOING ALONG WITH THIS YOU'RE NOT GOING TO BUILD A TIME MACHINE FOR THESE MONSTERS
I'M TRYING TO SAVE BOTH OUR LIVES, KARL THIS IS THE ONLY WAY
WE'RE BOTH AS GOOD AS DEAD AND YOU KNOW IT! FIND A WAY TO KILL YOURSELF, AND DIE WITH A LITTLE HONOR INSTEAD OF HANDING THEM THE GALAXY ON AN ARMORED PIE PLATE!
CHEERY! HE JUST SLAPS A SMILE RIGHT THERE ON YOUR FACE, EH?
LET ME OUT OF THIS JAR AND YOU'LL BE WEARING A GRIN TO OUTLAST THE PHARAOHS!

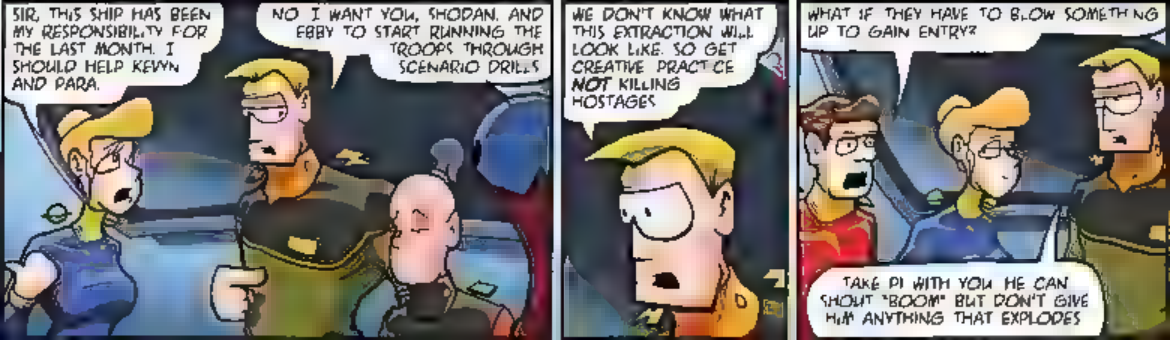

ABOARD THE MERCENARY WAR SHIP TOUCH AND GO
CAPTAIN BEFORE YOU MAKE ASSIGNMENTS YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT WE RE NOT THE ONLY PEOPLE WORKING ON THIS.
COMPETING BIDS ON THE JOB? I DON'T CARE, THIS IS PERSONAL.
THAT'S NOT IT AT ALL SIR WE'RE GETTING HELP AND EVERYBODY WORKING ON THIS GETS PAID
WELL, THAT'S OKAY THEN. I MEAN... I WASN'T REALLY GOING TO DO ANY ACTUAL WORK FOR FREE.
WHY DON'T I REVIEW OUR ASSETS?
GOOD IDEA.

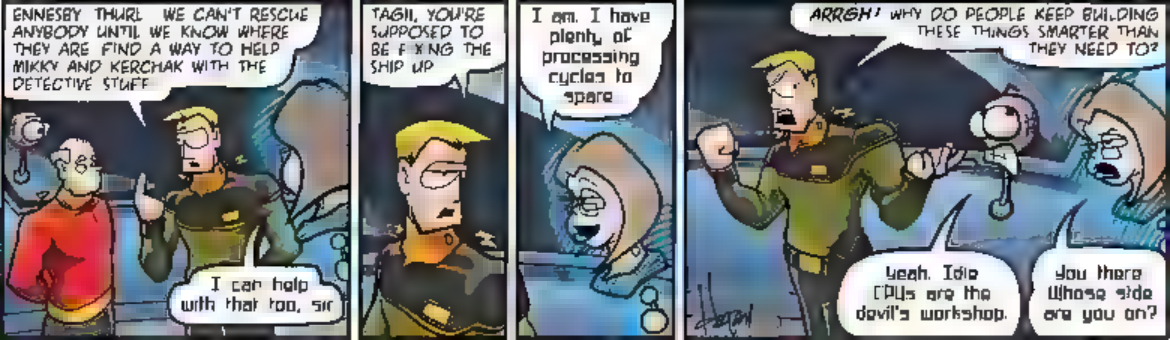

RETIRED REAR ADMIRAL MIKHAIL VON MAUSER HAS HIRED A TEAM OF PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS ON CELESCHUL, AND THEY ARE WORKING CLOSELY WITH THE POLICE AT THE SCENE OF THE CRIME
EX-PAT GENERAL EDGAR KERCHAK, FORMERLY OF THE U.N.S., IS COORDINATING THE DATA-MINING EFFORTS
HE'S ALSO OUR EMPLOYER CAPTAIN ANDREYASN'S RESCUE CONTRACT FELL IN HIS LAP SOMEHOW
THESE GUYS ARE CONNECTED I'M GLAD THEY BROUGHT US IN. BUT I DON'T SEE WHY THEY NEED US
SHIPS ARE IN SHORT SUPPLY OR SO I'VE HEARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO IS A READY MATERIEL ASSET AND OF COURSE THERE IS THE PERSONAL CONNECTION. OL' MIKKY MAUSER KNEW YOU'D WANT IN.


AND THE FACT THAT YOU COMMAND A SOLID CADRE OF TRAINED PERSONNEL DOESN'T HURT
SPEAKING OF PERSONNEL WHERE'S BARSOOM COMMAND?
THEY'RE UNDER HOUSE ARREST IN LAKESIDE HOSPITAL IN MARINERIS DAM CITY
AT LEAST THREE OF THEM ARE SCHLOCK IS LYING LOW, PER MY ORDERS
MEANWHILE AT MARINERIS MOTORS
WHAT CAN I DO YOU OUT OF TODAY MY FRIEND?
I WANT TO BUY AN AMBULANCE

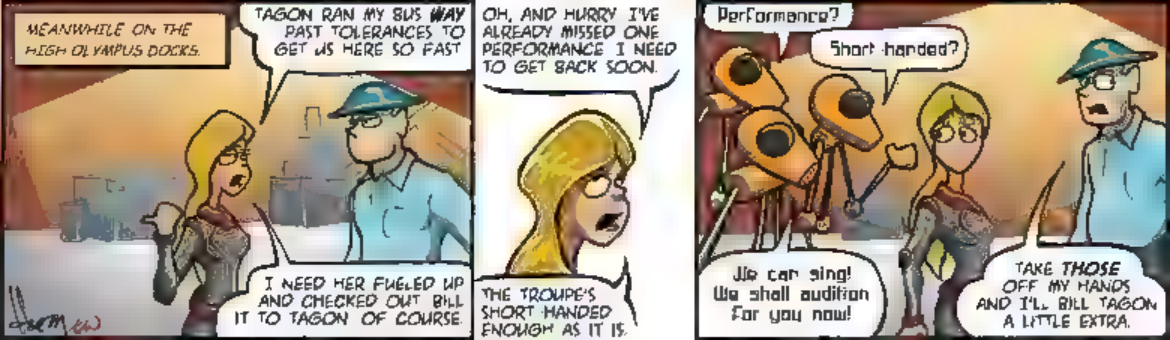

CAPTAIN. THAT MESS BARSOOM COMMAND IS IN... IT'S AT LEAST PARTLY MY FAULT
I SUGGESTED THEY ASK LUNESBY FOR HELP, BUT THE WHOLE SCHEME WAS AN ATTEMPT TO FLUSH LUNESBY OUT OF HIDING
GREAT WELL PULL SOME LEGAL STRING-THINGIES AND SEE IF YOU CAN GET THEM RELEASED
BUT HURRY IF SCHLOCK'S LOOSE HE'S PROBABLY COOKING UP SOME PLAN TO BUST THEM OUT
WHAT DO YOU THINK HE'LL DO?
HMPH I'VE BEEN ASKED [illegible] WOULD SCHLOCK DO A LOT THIS MONTH
I'M MORE WORRIED ABOUT WHAT WON'T SCHLOCK DO

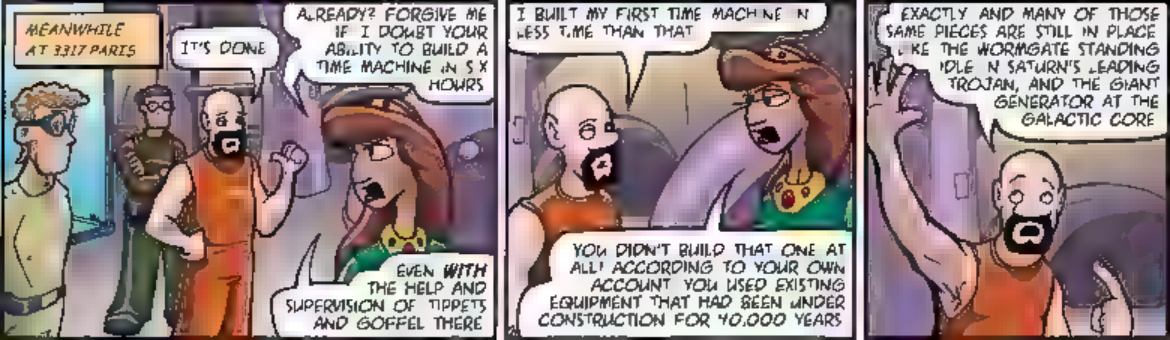

KEWN, PARA, TAGI. ONCE WE KNOW WHERE WE'RE GOING. WE'RE GOING TO GO FAST
I WANT TO BE READY FOR A FIGHT. FINISH GETTING THIS SHIP REPAIRED. HOOK UP SOME WEAPONS. GET THE DEBRIS OFF THE DECKS
THAT'S A TALL ORDER, SIR. WHO ARE WE PRESS-GANGING FOR HELP?
WE'RE IN A SHIPYARD. HAVE PARA YELL AT SOME ROBOTS

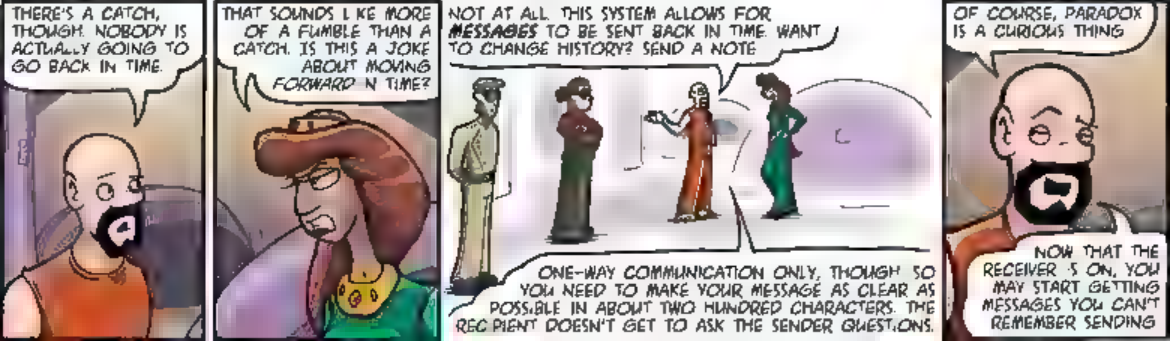

SIR, THIS SHIP HAS BEEN MY RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE LAST MONTH. I SHOULD HELP KEVYN AND PARA.
NO I WANT YOU, SHODAN, AND EBBY TO START RUNNING THE TROOPS THROUGH SCENARIO DRILLS
WE DON'T KNOW WHAT THIS EXTRACTION WILL LOOK LIKE. SO GET CREATIVE PRACTICE NOT KILLING HOSTAGES
WHAT IF THEY HAVE TO BLOW SOMETHING UP TO GAIN ENTRY?
TAKE PI WITH YOU HE CAN SHOUT "BOOM" BUT DON'T GIVE HIM ANYTHING THAT EXPLODES

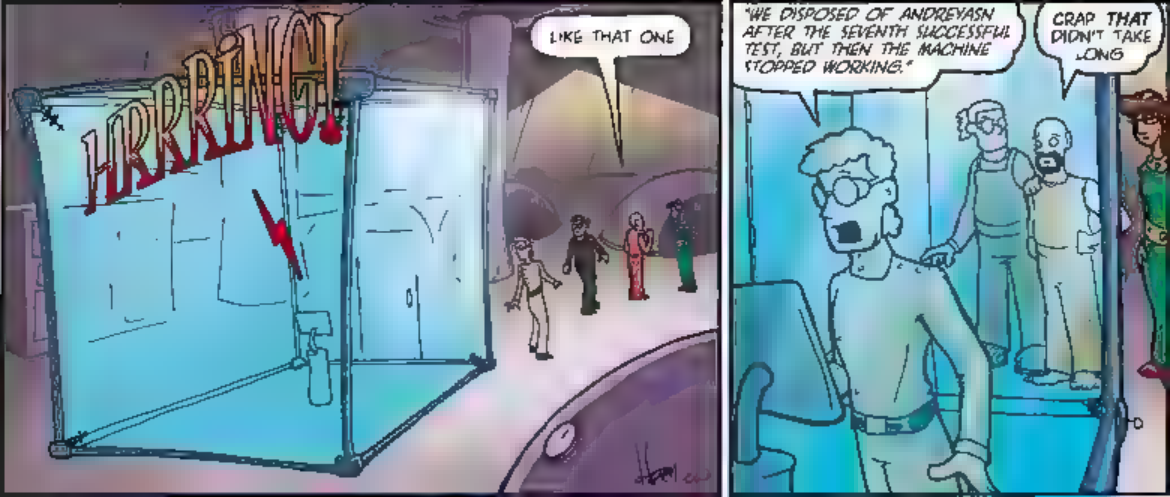

ENNESBY THURL WE CAN'T RESCUE ANYBODY UNTIL WE KNOW WHERE THEY ARE FIND A WAY TO HELP MIKKY AND KERCHAK WITH THE DETECTIVE STUFF
I can help with that too, sir
TAGH, YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE F*XING THE SHIP UP
I am. I have plenty of processing cycles to spare
ARRGH! WHY DO PEOPLE KEEP BUILDING THESE THINGS SMARTER THAN THEY NEED TO?
Yeah. Idle CPUs are the devil's workshop.
You there. Whose side are you on?


Sir? What would you like me to do? I want to help.
General Tagon and Captain Andreyasn built me as a gift for you. Their safety is important to me.
I HAVE NO IDEA WHERE TO PUT YOU, TAILOR.
Well, you gave Lieutenant Ventura permission to yell at robots, so maybe you can order me to stay away from her?

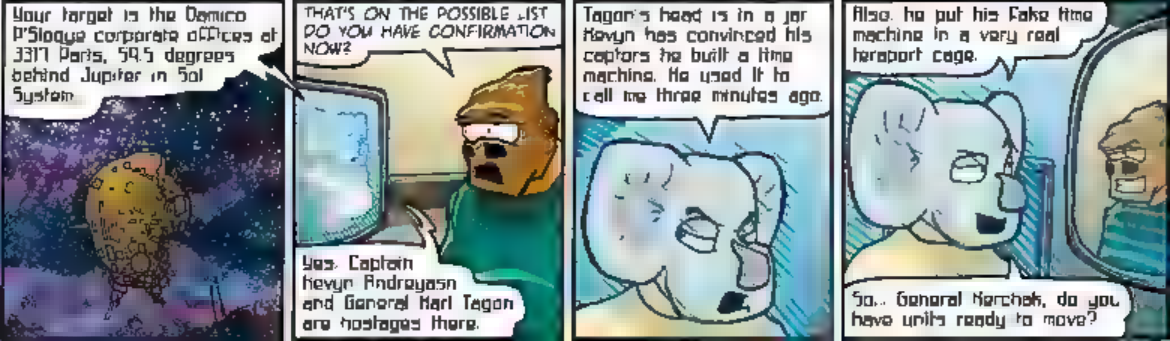

MEANWHILE ON THE HIGH OLYMPUS DOCKS.
TAGON RAN MY BUS WAY PAST TOLERANCES TO GET US HERE SO FAST
I NEED HER FUELED UP AND CHECKED OUT BILL IT TO TAGON OF COURSE.
OH, AND HURRY I'VE ALREADY MISSED ONE PERFORMANCE I NEED TO GET BACK SOON.
THE TROUPE'S SHORT HANDED ENOUGH AS IT IS.
Performance?
Short-handed?
We can sing! We shall audition for you now!
TAKE THOSE OFF MY HANDS AND I'LL BILL TAGON A LITTLE EXTRA.


MEANWHILE AT 3317 PARIS
IT'S DONE
ALREADY? FORGIVE ME IF I DOUBT YOUR ABILITY TO BUILD A TIME MACHINE IN SIX HOURS
EVEN WITH THE HELP AND SUPERVISION OF TIPPETS AND GOFFEL THERE
I BUILT MY FIRST TIME MACHINE IN LESS TIME THAN THAT
YOU DIDN'T BUILD THAT ONE AT ALL! ACCORDING TO YOUR OWN ACCOUNT YOU USED EXISTING EQUIPMENT THAT HAD BEEN UNDER CONSTRUCTION FOR 40,000 YEARS
EXACTLY AND MANY OF THOSE SAME PIECES ARE STILL IN PLACE LIKE THE WORMGATE STANDING IDLE IN SATURN'S LEADING TROJAN, AND THE GIANT GENERATOR AT THE GALACTIC CORE

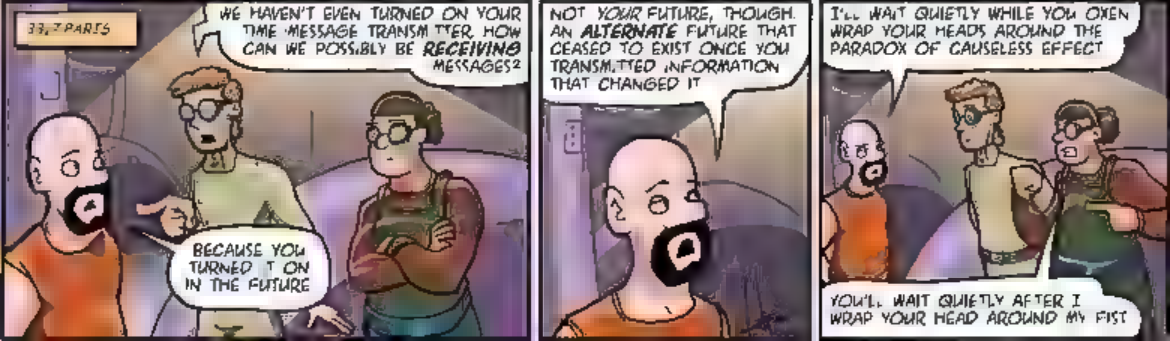

THERE'S A CATCH, THOUGH. NOBODY IS ACTUALLY GOING TO GO BACK IN TIME.
THAT SOUNDS LIKE MORE OF A FUMBLE THAN A CATCH. IS THIS A JOKE ABOUT MOVING FORWARD IN TIME?
NOT AT ALL. THIS SYSTEM ALLOWS FOR **MESSAGES** TO BE SENT BACK IN TIME. WANT TO CHANGE HISTORY? SEND A NOTE.
ONE-WAY COMMUNICATION ONLY, THOUGH. SO YOU NEED TO MAKE YOUR MESSAGE AS CLEAR AS POSSIBLE IN ABOUT TWO HUNDRED CHARACTERS. THE RECIPIENT DOESN'T GET TO ASK THE SENDER QUESTIONS.
OF COURSE, PARADOX IS A CURIOUS THING.
NOW THAT THE RECEIVER'S ON, YOU MAY START GETTING MESSAGES YOU CAN'T REMEMBER SENDING

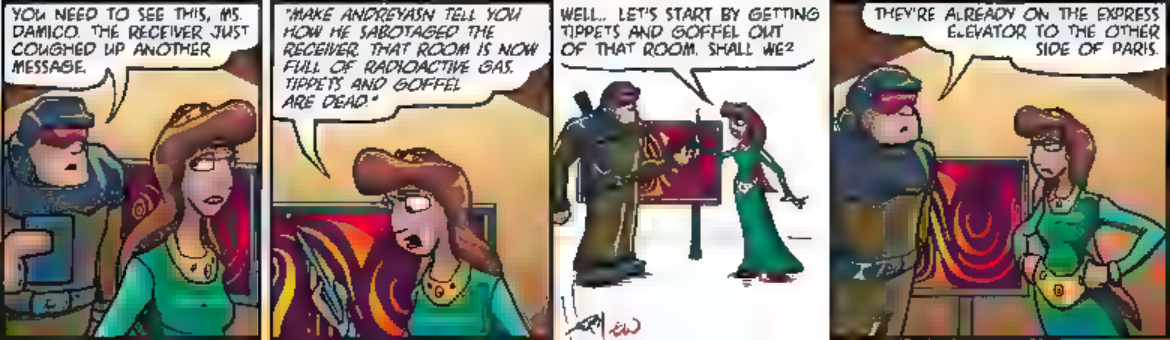

HRRRING!
LIKE THAT ONE
"WE DISPOSED OF ANDREYASN AFTER THE SEVENTH SUCCESSFUL TEST, BUT THEN THE MACHINE STOPPED WORKING."
CRAP THAT DIDN'T TAKE LONG


MEANWHILE NEAR THE GALACTIC CORE
General Korchek, do you have units ready to move?
I DO FUNNY COINCIDENCE! HA-HA! UMM. ADMIRAL VON MAUSER HIRED TAGON'S TOUGHS FOR THE JOB
I REALIZE YOU DIDN'T WANT TO CONTACT THE TOUGHS BUT I HAD NO IDEA VON MAUSER WAS FRIENDS WITH TAGON'S CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER. I. UMM I HOPE "TWO" IS ENOUGH DEGREES OF SEPARATION FOR YOU.
UNLESS. WAIT
YOU TOTALLY PLANNED THIS, DIDN'T YOU?
YOU ARE SCARY SMART, YOU KNOW THAT?
Two degrees of separation will suffice, general.

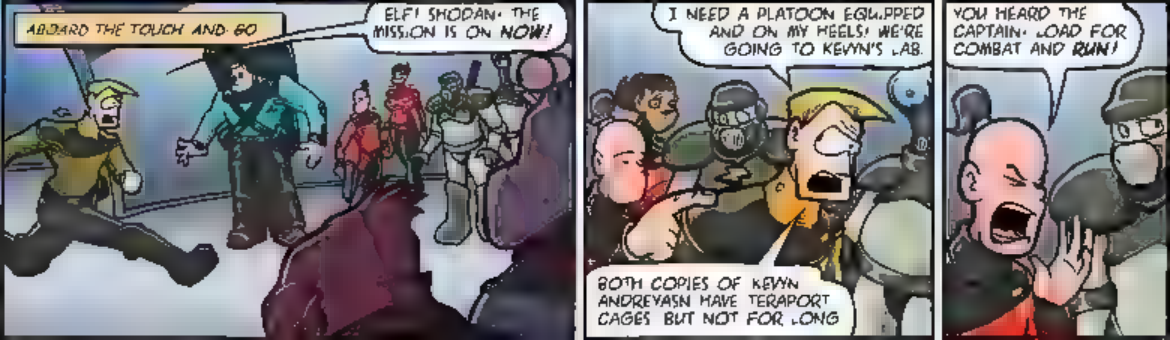

Your target is the Demico B'Sloque corporate offices at 3317 Parts, 59.5 degrees behind Jupiter in Sol System.
THAT'S ON THE POSSIBLE LIST DO YOU HAVE CONFIRMATION NOW?
Yes. Captain Kevyn Andreyasn and General Karl Tagon are hostages there.
Tagon's head is in a jar Kevyn has convinced his captors he built a time machine. He used it to call me three minutes ago.
Also. he put his fake time machine in a very real teraport cage.
So... General Kerchak, do you have units ready to move?


ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO..
CAPTAIN! WE NEED TO MOBILIZE NOW!
WE'VE GOT COORDINATES, AND WE'VE GOT AN OPEN DOOR. KEV-CLONE BUILT A TERAPORT CAGE, AND SENT US THE ADDRESS.
HE AND YOUR DAD ARE IN A MOB-OWNED ASTEROID FORT IN THE TROJANS
YOU TALKED TO HIM?
ONE-WAY COMMO ONLY BUT HERE'S THE DATA DUMP
I THOUGHT YOU SAID IT WAS AN ASTEROID. WHAT'S THIS ADDRESS IN PARIS?
I KEEP FORGETTING I SHOULD ONLY HAND YOU SUMMARIES. NEVER DATA DUMPS.

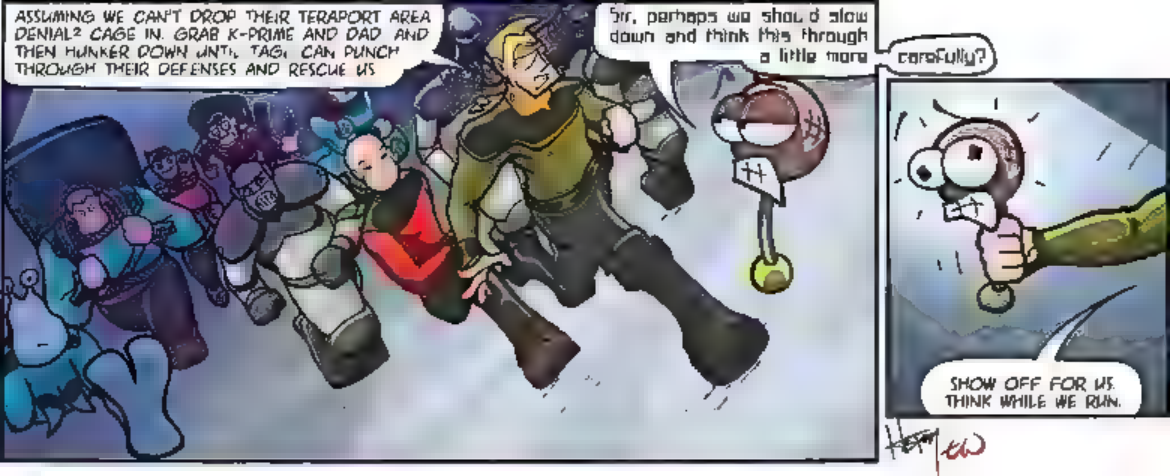

33,7 PARIS
WE HAVEN'T EVEN TURNED ON YOUR TIME-MESSAGE TRANSMITTER. HOW CAN WE POSSIBLY BE RECEIVING MESSAGES?
BECAUSE YOU TURNED IT ON IN THE FUTURE
NOT YOUR FUTURE, THOUGH. AN ALTERNATE FUTURE THAT CEASED TO EXIST ONCE YOU TRANSMITTED INFORMATION THAT CHANGED IT
I'LL WAIT QUIETLY WHILE YOU OXEN WRAP YOUR HEADS AROUND THE PARADOX OF CAUSELESS EFFECT
YOU'LL WAIT QUIETLY AFTER I WRAP YOUR HEAD AROUND MY FIST

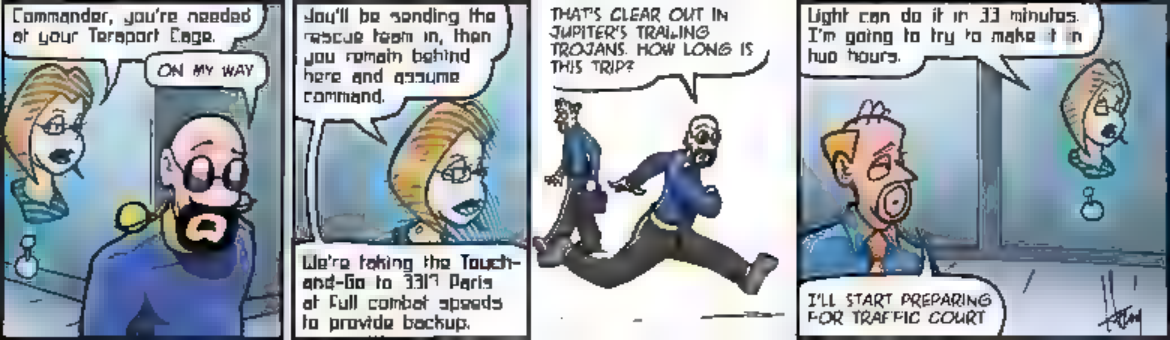

YOU NEED TO SEE THIS, MS. DAMICO. THE RECEIVER JUST COUGHED UP ANOTHER MESSAGE.
"MAKE ANDREYASN TELL YOU HOW HE SABOTAGED THE RECEIVER. THAT ROOM IS NOW FULL OF RADIOACTIVE GAS. TIPPETS AND GOFFEL ARE DEAD."
WELL... LET'S START BY GETTING TIPPETS AND GOFFEL OUT OF THAT ROOM. SHALL WE?
THEY'RE ALREADY ON THE EXPRESS ELEVATOR TO THE OTHER SIDE OF PARIS.


CAPTAIN ANDREYASN. I SUSPECT THAT YOU ARE PLAYING US.
ANOTHER MESSAGE MA'AM!
"TWO PLATOONS OF COMMANDOS APPEARED IN THE RECEIVER ROOM. SEND TROOPS TO DEFEND AND CONTAIN IN ADVANCE!"
LIAR. YOU DIDN'T BUILD A TIME MACHINE AT ALL.
I DON'T CALL MY SOLDIERS "TROOPS." AND I'M CERTAINLY NOT GOING TO DIVERT DEFENSES TO COVER THAT LAB, WHICH YOU'VE PROBABLY RIGGED TO EXPLODE SOMEHOW
CAN WE START OVER WITH THE TORTURING THEN? THIS GAME WAS GETTING OLD


ABOARD THE TOUCH AND GO
ELF! SHODAN: THE MISSION IS ON NOW!
I NEED A PLATOON EQUIPPED AND ON MY HEELS! WE'RE GOING TO KEVYN'S LAB.
BOTH COPIES OF KEVYN ANDREYASN HAVE TERAPORT CAGES BUT NOT FOR LONG
YOU HEARD THE CAPTAIN: LOAD FOR COMBAT AND RUN!


WHAT'S THE PLAN, SIR?
PLAN A: TERAPORT CAGE IN, GRAB KEVYN-PRIME AND MY DAD TERAPORT CAGE BACK OUT
PLAN B: TERAPORT CAGE IN, GRAB K-PRIME AND DAD DISABLE THE TERAPORT AREA DENIAL SYSTEM, AND HAVE ENNESBY PORT US BACK OUT
?
So I guess I'm coming along then
OKAY WHAT'S PLAN C?


ASSUMING WE CAN'T DROP THEIR TERAPORT AREA DENIAL² CAGE IN. GRAB K-PRIME AND DAD AND THEN HUNKER DOWN UNTIL TAG CAN PUNCH THROUGH THEIR DEFENSES AND RESCUE US
Sir, perhaps we should slow down and think this through a little more carefully?
SHOW OFF FOR US. THINK WHILE WE RUN.

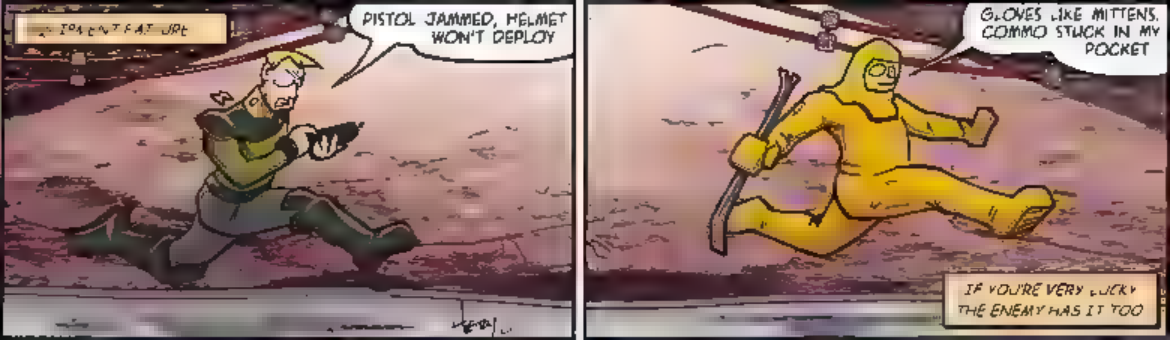

Commander, you're needed at your Teraport Cage.
ON MY WAY
You'll be sending the rescue team in, then you remain behind here and assume command.
We're taking the Touch-and-Go to 3317 Paris at full combat speeds to provide backup.
THAT'S CLEAR OUT IN JUPITER'S TRAILING TROJANS. HOW LONG IS THIS TRIP?
Light can do it in 33 minutes. I'm going to try to make it in two hours.
I'LL START PREPARING FOR TRAFFIC COURT

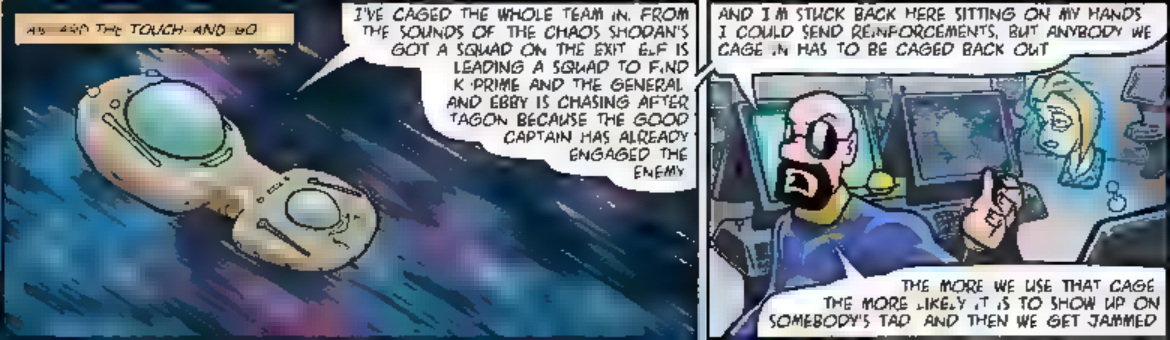

33.7 PARTS
YOU THREE! MISTER ANDREYASN HERE HAS BUILT SOMETHING IN THE LAB IT MIGHT BE DANGEROUS.
CORRECTION: IT'S DEFINITELY DANGEROUS.
I JUST DON'T KNOW HOW
SO. GO BREAK IT BUT TRY NOT TO SET OFF ANYTHING YOU KNOW, VOLATILE
I WISH IT HAD BEEN NICE KNOWING YOU.

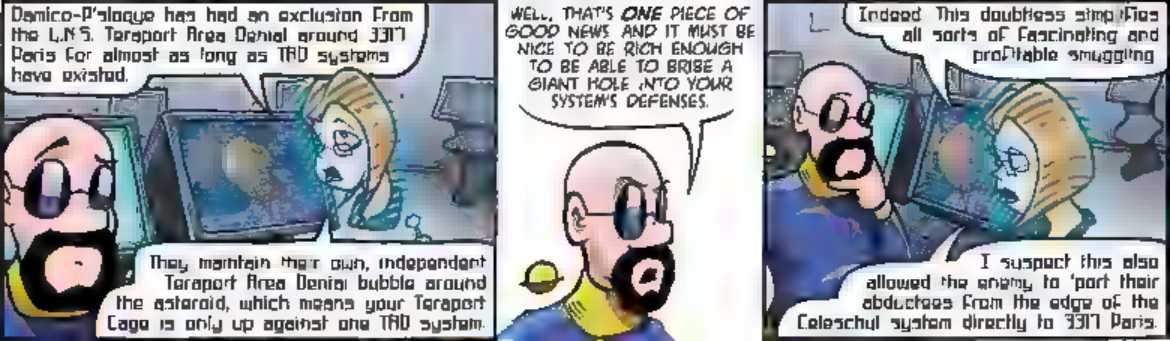

TOUCH AND GO
NEXT THREE! LET'S GO. MOVE.
Send me!
COMBAT TEAMS FIRST TAILOR
But the captain needs me now!
3317 PARIS.
HELMET UP, S.R.
I'M TRYING
TOUCH

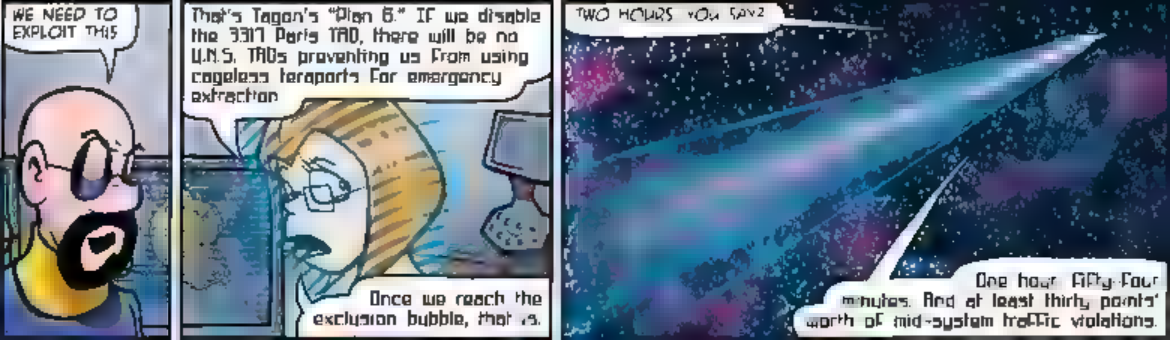

VOLATILE, SHE SAYS. DANGEROUS. I'D LOVE TO KNOW EXACTLY WHAT WE'RE ACTUALLY GOING TO BE
FACING?


I WORK FOR THE MOB HOW DID I END UP BEING THE GUY WHO BRINGS A PRYBAR TO A GUNFIGHT?

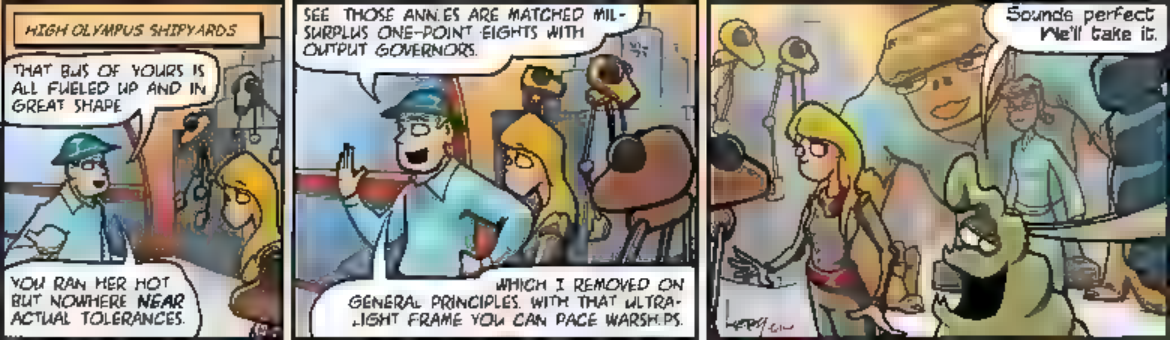

PISTOL JAMMED, HELMET WON'T DEPLOY
GLOVES LIKE MITTENS. COMMO STUCK IN MY POCKET
IF YOU'RE VERY LUCKY THE ENEMY HAS IT TOO

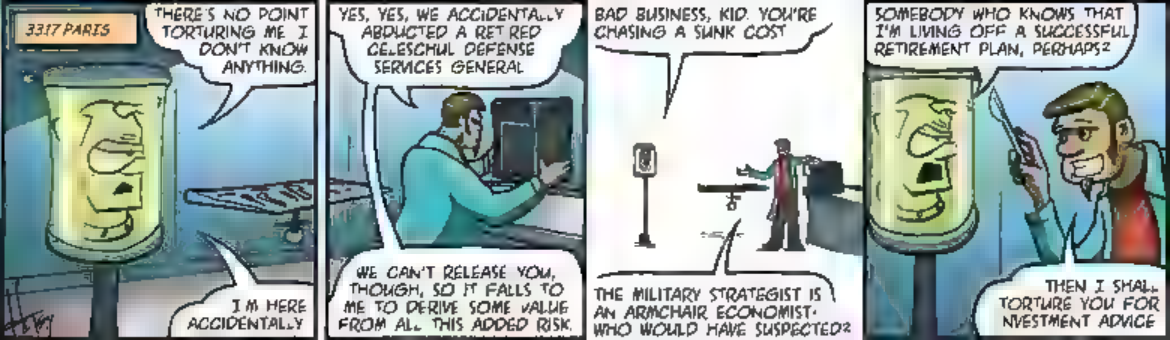

AS AND THE TOUCH AND GO
I'VE CAGED THE WHOLE TEAM IN. FROM THE SOUNDS OF THE CHAOS SHODAN'S GOT A SQUAD ON THE EXIT ELF IS LEADING A SQUAD TO FIND K-PRIME AND THE GENERAL AND EBBY IS CHASING AFTER TAGON BECAUSE THE GOOD CAPTAIN HAS ALREADY ENGAGED THE ENEMY
AND I'M STUCK BACK HERE SITTING ON MY HANDS I COULD SEND REINFORCEMENTS, BUT ANYBODY WE CAGE IN HAS TO BE CAGED BACK OUT
THE MORE WE USE THAT CAGE THE MORE LIKELY IT IS TO SHOW UP ON SOMEBODY'S TAD AND THEN WE GET JAMMED

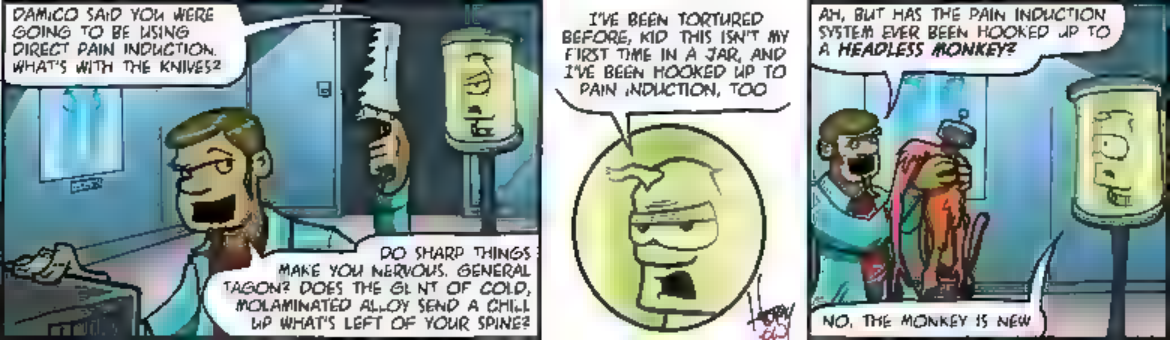

Damico-D'sloque has had an exclusion from the L.N.S. Teraport Area Denial around 3317 Paris for almost as long as TAD systems have existed.
They maintain their own, independent Teraport Area Denial bubble around the asteroid, which means your Teraport Cage is only up against one TAD system.
WELL, THAT'S ONE PIECE OF GOOD NEWS AND IT MUST BE NICE TO BE RICH ENOUGH TO BE ABLE TO BRIBE A GIANT HOLE INTO YOUR SYSTEM'S DEFENSES.
Indeed. This doubtless simplifies all sorts of fascinating and profitable smuggling
I suspect this also allowed the enemy to 'port their abductees from the edge of the Celeschul system directly to 3317 Paris.


WE NEED TO EXPLOIT THIS
That's Tagon's "Plan B." If we disable the 3317 Paris TAD, there will be no U.N.S. TADs preventing us from using cageless teraports for emergency extraction.
Once we reach the exclusion bubble, that is.
TWO HOURS YOU SAY?
One hour fifty-four minutes. And at least thirty points' worth of mid-system traffic violations.

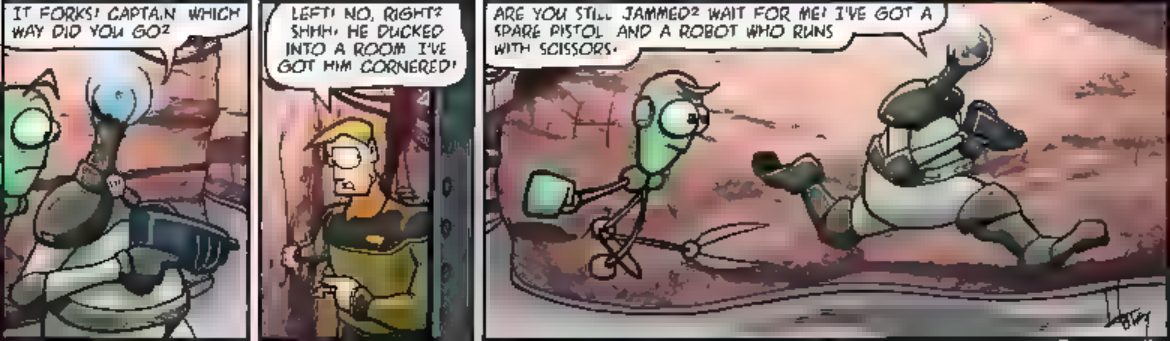

I'M PAYING THE FINES AS FAST AS THEY ACCRUE, BUT IT LOOKS LIKE SOMEBODY ELSE DRAINED ONE OF OUR ACCOUNTS.
AND BOUGHT AN AMBULANCE?
OWW! SARGE WHERE DID YOU LEARN TO FLY?
I got thrown out of a building once.


HIGH OLYMPUS SHIPYARDS
THAT BUS OF YOURS IS ALL FUELED UP AND IN GREAT SHAPE
YOU RAN HER HOT BUT NOWHERE NEAR ACTUAL TOLERANCES.
SEE THOSE ANNIES ARE MATCHED MIL-SURPLUS ONE-POINT-EIGHTS WITH OUTPUT GOVERNORS.
WHICH I REMOVED ON GENERAL PRINCIPLES. WITH THAT ULTRA-LIGHT FRAME YOU CAN PACE WARSHIPS.
Sounds perfect We'll take it.

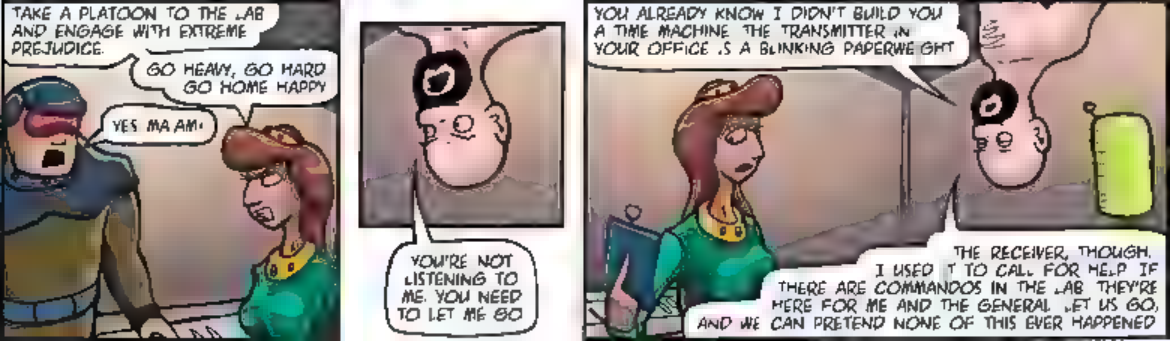

3317 PARIS
THERE'S NO POINT TORTURING ME I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING.
I'M HERE ACCIDENTALLY
YES, YES, WE ACCIDENTALLY ABDUCTED A RET RED CELESCHUL DEFENSE SERVICES GENERAL
WE CAN'T RELEASE YOU, THOUGH, SO IT FALLS TO ME TO DERIVE SOME VALUE FROM ALL THIS ADDED RISK.
BAD BUSINESS, KID. YOU'RE CHASING A SUNK COST
THE MILITARY STRATEGIST IS AN ARMCHAIR ECONOMIST· WHO WOULD HAVE SUSPECTED[2]
SOMEBODY WHO KNOWS THAT I'M LIVING OFF A SUCCESSFUL RETIREMENT PLAN, PERHAPS[2]
THEN I SHALL TORTURE YOU FOR INVESTMENT ADVICE

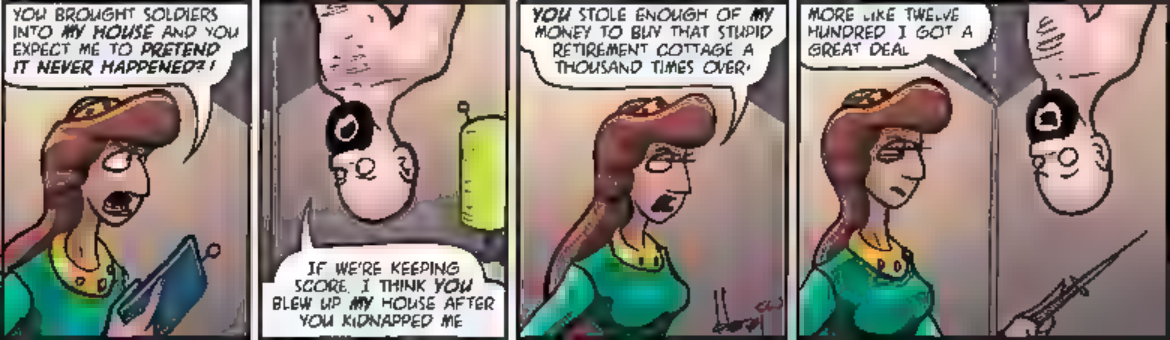

DAMICO SAID YOU WERE GOING TO BE USING DIRECT PAIN INDUCTION. WHAT'S WITH THE KNIVES?
DO SHARP THINGS MAKE YOU NERVOUS, GENERAL TAGON? DOES THE GLINT OF COLD, MOLAMINATED ALLOY SEND A CHILL UP WHAT'S LEFT OF YOUR SPINE?
I'VE BEEN TORTURED BEFORE, KID. THIS ISN'T MY FIRST TIME IN A JAR, AND I'VE BEEN HOOKED UP TO PAIN INDUCTION, TOO
AH, BUT HAS THE PAIN INDUCTION SYSTEM EVER BEEN HOOKED UP TO A HEADLESS MONKEY?
NO, THE MONKEY IS NEW


ARMED INTRUDERS! ONE OF 'EM'S RIGHT BEHIND ME!
DO YOU HAVE WEAPONS? ALL I'VE GOT IS THIS PRYBAR!
I'VE GOT PLENTY OF KNIVES AND SOME VERY INTERESTING DRUGS.
PLUS A HOSTAGE IN A JAR AND ONE HEADLESS MONKEY. LIST ALL YOUR ASSETS KID

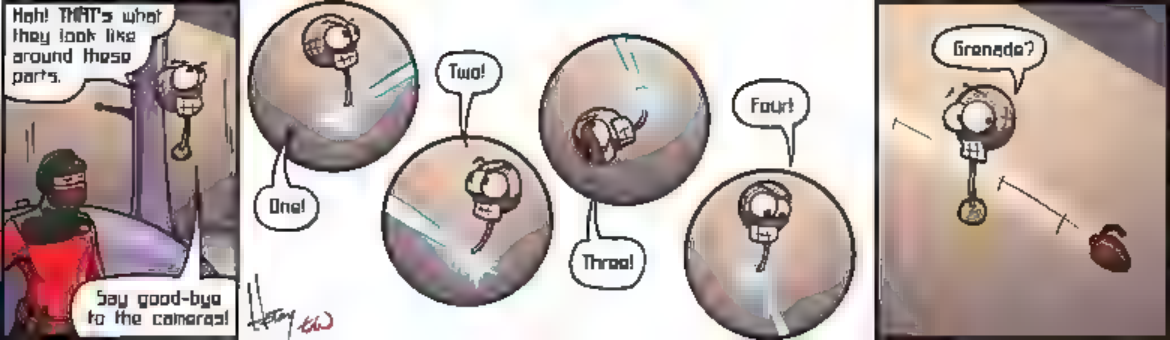

IT FORKS! CAPTAIN WHICH WAY DID YOU GO?
LEFT! NO, RIGHT? SHHH. HE DUCKED INTO A ROOM. I'VE GOT HIM CORNERED!
ARE YOU STILL JAMMED? WAIT FOR ME! I'VE GOT A SPARE PISTOL AND A ROBOT WHO RUNS WITH SCISSORS.


MS. DAMICO, ARMED INTRUDERS HAVE APPEARED IN THE LAB!
MORE PHONY TIME-TRAVEL MESSAGES? I TOLD YOU, THAT RECEIVER IS FAKE
CAVALRY'S HERE
REAL INTRUDERS, MA'AM. WE'VE GOT THEM ON CAMERA. THE HAZARD TEAM IS DOWN
WELL. THANK YOU FOR ANNOUNCING IT IN FRONT OF MY GUEST. I REALLY NEED TO TEACH YOU IDIOTS TO SEND TEXT MESSAGES.
RIGHT NOW YOU REALLY NEED TO LET ME GO

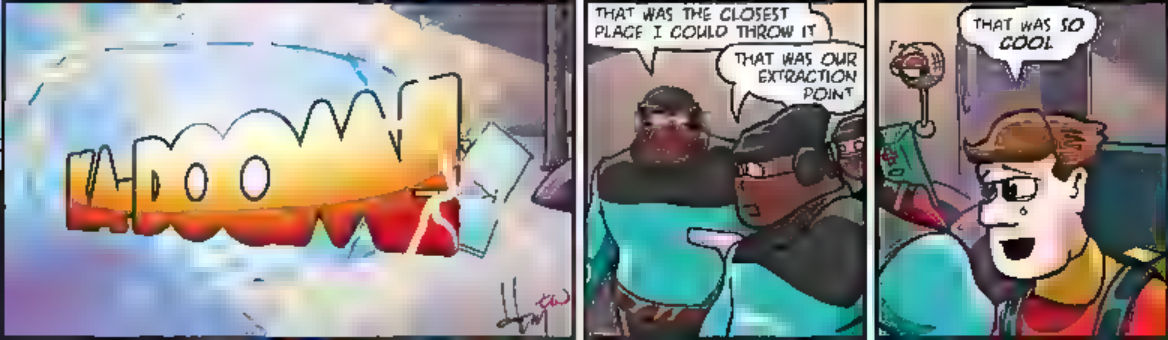

TAKE A PLATOON TO THE LAB AND ENGAGE WITH EXTREME PREJUDICE.
GO HEAVY, GO HARD GO HOME HAPPY
YES MA'AM!
YOU'RE NOT LISTENING TO ME. YOU NEED TO LET ME GO
YOU ALREADY KNOW I DIDN'T BUILD YOU A TIME MACHINE. THE TRANSMITTER IN YOUR OFFICE IS A BLINKING PAPERWEIGHT
I USED IT TO CALL FOR HELP. THE RECEIVER, THOUGH, THERE ARE COMMANDOS IN THE LAB. THEY'RE HERE FOR ME AND THE GENERAL. LET US GO, AND WE CAN PRETEND NONE OF THIS EVER HAPPENED


YOU BROUGHT SOLDIERS INTO MY HOUSE AND YOU EXPECT ME TO PRETEND IT NEVER HAPPENED?!
IF WE'RE KEEPING SCORE, I THINK YOU BLEW UP MY HOUSE AFTER YOU KIDNAPPED ME
YOU STOLE ENOUGH OF MY MONEY TO BUY THAT STUPID RETIREMENT COTTAGE A THOUSAND TIMES OVER!
MORE LIKE TWELVE HUNDRED I GOT A GREAT DEAL


CAN I TELL YOU THE NICEST THING ABOUT THAT CHEAP YET COMFORTABLE HOUSE THAT USED TO STAND ABOVE THE CRATER YOU MADE?
IT WAS EASY FOR US TO ABDUCT YOU OUT OF IT?
IT WAS CHEAP. I STILL HAVE ALL OF YOUR MONEY
YOU'RE BARGAINING. THAT MEANS YOU DON'T REALLY BELIEVE YOUR FRIENDS CAN SAVE YOU.
NO, IT MEANS I THINK THEY MAY LEAD WITH GRENADES.


Hah! THAT's what they look like around these parts.
Say good-bye to the cameras!
One!
Two!
Three!
Four!
Grenade?


WHEN A LIVE GRENADE ARRIVES MOST PEOPLE WILL LEAP AWAY FROM IT AND FIND COVER
SOME PEOPLE WILL LEAP TOWARDS IT AND ATTEMPT SOMETHING HEROIC.
LIKE THROWING IT WHERE IT CAN STRAND THE WHOLE TEAM DEEP BEHIND ENEMY LINES


BOOM
THAT WAS THE CLOSEST PLACE I COULD THROW IT
THAT WAS OUR EXTRACTION POINT
THAT WAS SO COOL


FOOMP
BOUNCE
BOUNCE
BOUNCE
AAAHEEE!
BOOM
THEIR GRENADE CAME AT US THROUGH AN AIR-VENT, SIR I RETURNED THE FAVOR
SMALL KINDNESS, M'CONGER DON'T JUST PAY IT BACK, THOUGH. PAY .'T FORWARD
FOOMP
FOOMP
FOOMP


NEARBY AT THE OTHER END OF AN AIR DUCT
SOMEBODY'S STILL ALIVE OVER THERE
AND THEY'VE FIGURED OUT HOW TO LOB GRENADES BACK AT US THROUGH THE AIR DUCTS.
I COULD TOSS IN A COUPLE MORE, MAYBE FINISH THE JOB?
THEY'RE PROBABLY EXPECTING THAT
YEAH, THEY MIGHT HAVE CLOSED THE VENT

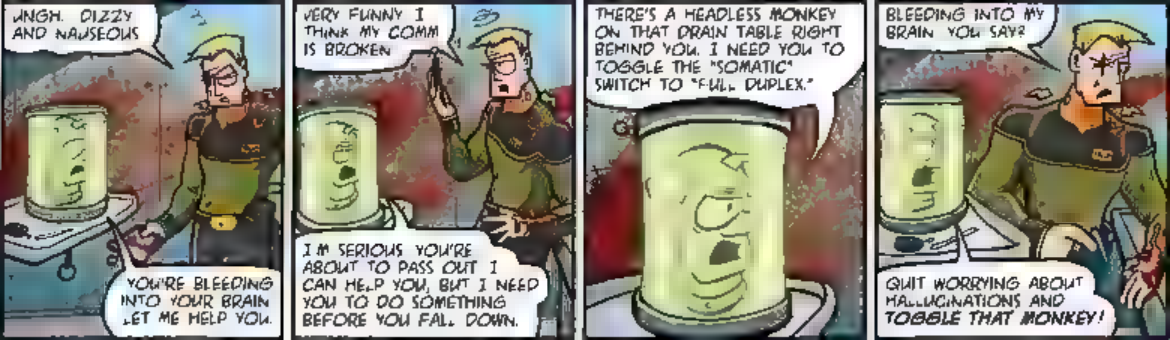

MEANWHILE DOWN THE HALL
I CAN'T WAIT FOR YOU ANY LONGER EBBY I'M GOING IN.
DID YOU UNJAM THAT PISTOL YET?
NO, BUT I DO HAVE A COUPLE OF
GRENADES.
AND I'VE GOT A HOSTAGE

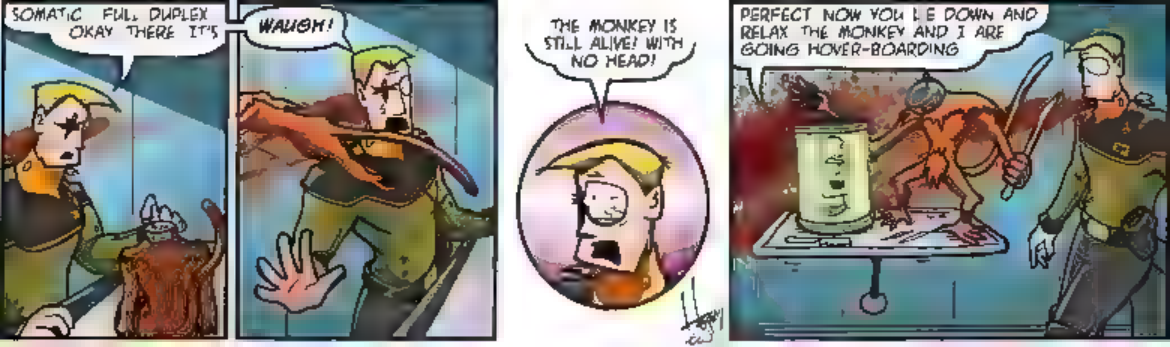

I BET THAT JAR'S PRETTY STURDY
TSHOKK!

I ALSO HAVE A KNIFE

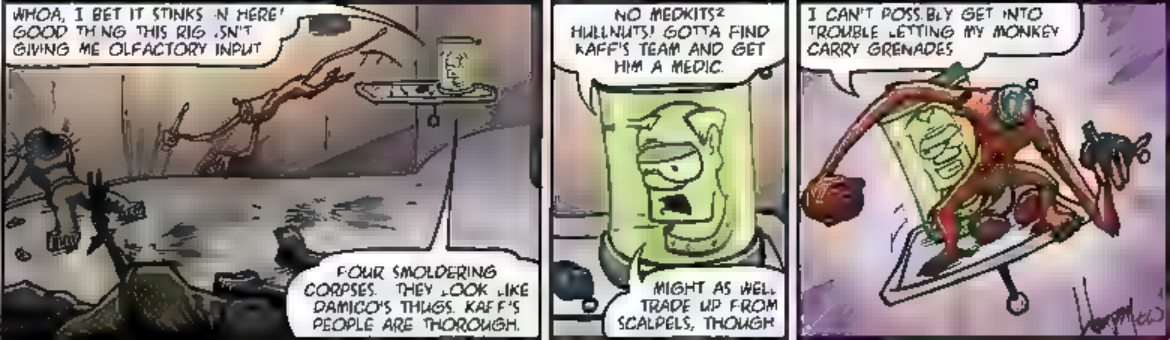

SHLLLLK!
THANK YOU. NOW I HAVE A KNIFE

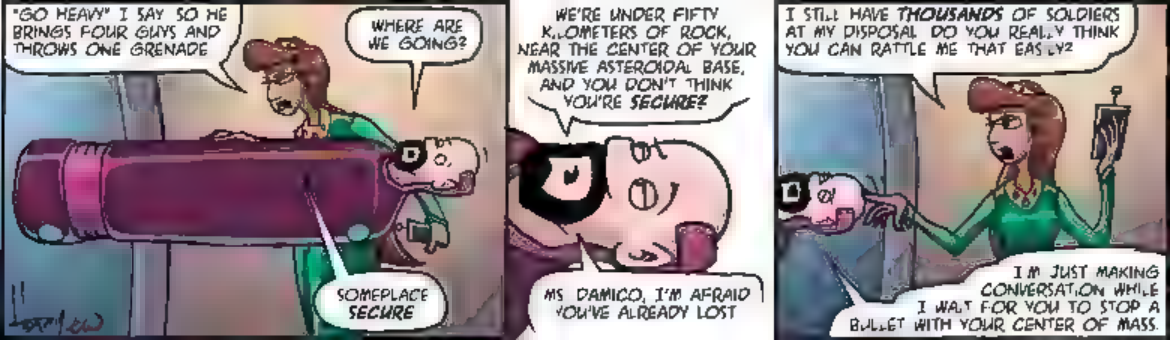

EBBY HAVE YOU AND TAILOR CAUGHT UP WITH THE CAPTAIN YET?
NO. WE TOOK A WRONG TURN AND THEN A COUPLE MORE WRONG TURNS
We're in a maze of twisty passages, all alike!
HE'S NOT ANSWERING HIS COMM.
HE ENGAGED A COUPLE OF MINUTES AGO HE PROBABLY HAS HIS HANDS FULL
YOU WANT A HAND WITH THAT BOY?
SOMEDAY THEY'LL MAKE A TOUCH-SCREEN THAT WORKS WHEN IT'S COVERED IN BLOOD

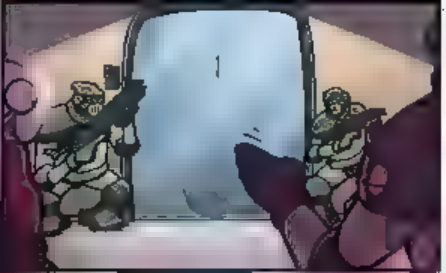

UNGH. DIZZY AND NAUSEOUS
YOU'RE BLEEDING INTO YOUR BRAIN. LET ME HELP YOU.
VERY FUNNY. I THINK MY COMM IS BROKEN
I'M SERIOUS. YOU'RE ABOUT TO PASS OUT. I CAN HELP YOU, BUT I NEED YOU TO DO SOMETHING BEFORE YOU FALL DOWN.
THERE'S A HEADLESS MONKEY ON THAT DRAIN TABLE RIGHT BEHIND YOU. I NEED YOU TO TOGGLE THE "SOMATIC" SWITCH TO "FULL DUPLEX."
BLEEDING INTO MY BRAIN, YOU SAY?
QUIT WORRYING ABOUT HALLUCINATIONS AND TOGGLE THAT MONKEY!


SOMATIC FULL DUPLEX OKAY THERE IT'S
WAUGH!
THE MONKEY IS STILL ALIVE! WITH NO HEAD!
PERFECT NOW YOU LIE DOWN AND RELAX THE MONKEY AND I ARE GOING HOVER-BOARDING


ELF I CAN'T RAISE TAGON ON THE COMM, AND EBBY CAN'T FIND H.M. YOU'RE IN COMMAND
I'M STILL TRYING TO FIND K-PRIME AND THE GENERAL ARE THERE DECISIONS TO BE MADE BACK AT THE CAGE?
WE LOST THE TERAPORT CAGE TO A GRENADE NO CASUALTIES.
GREAT WE'RE OFF CALLY ON TO "PLAN B" THEN
AND WE OUGHT TO COME UP WITH "PLAN D" BECAUSE I DON'T THINK EITHER B OR C ARE GOING TO LAST VERY LONG


WHOA, I BET IT STINKS IN HERE! GOOD THING THIS RIG ISN'T GIVING ME OLFACTORY INPUT
FOUR SMOLDERING CORPSES. THEY LOOK LIKE DAMICO'S THUGS. KAFF'S PEOPLE ARE THOROUGH.
NO MEDKITS? HULLNUTS! GOTTA FIND KAFF'S TEAM AND GET HIM A MEDIC.
MIGHT AS WELL TRADE UP FROM SCALPELS, THOUGH
I CAN'T POSSIBLY GET INTO TROUBLE LETTING MY MONKEY CARRY GRENADES

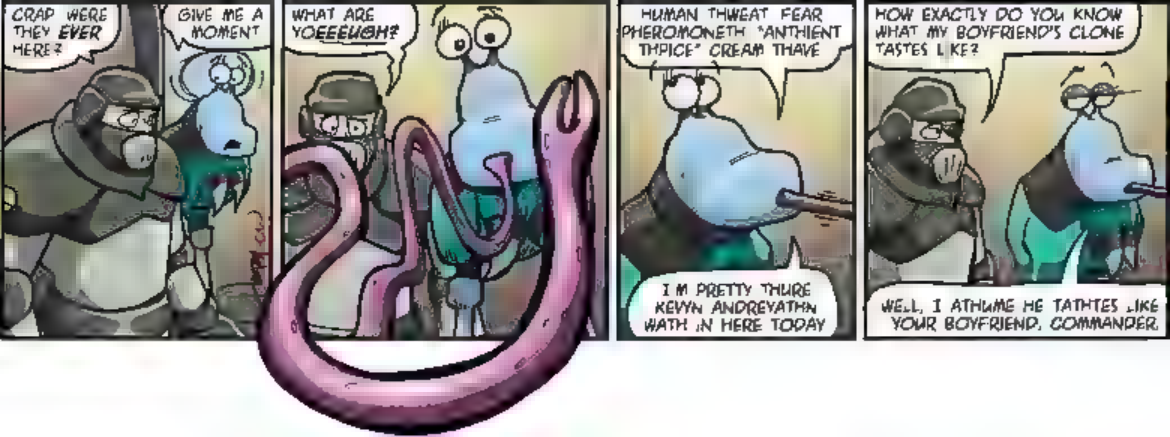

"GO HEAVY" I SAY SO HE BRINGS FOUR GUYS AND THROWS ONE GRENADE
WHERE ARE WE GOING?
SOMEPLACE SECURE
WE'RE UNDER FIFTY KILOMETERS OF ROCK, NEAR THE CENTER OF YOUR MASSIVE ASTEROIDAL BASE, AND YOU DON'T THINK YOU'RE SECURE?
MS DAMICO, I'M AFRAID YOU'VE ALREADY LOST
I STILL HAVE THOUSANDS OF SOLDIERS AT MY DISPOSAL DO YOU REALLY THINK YOU CAN RATTLE ME THAT EASILY?
I'M JUST MAKING CONVERSATION WHILE I WAIT FOR YOU TO STOP A BULLET WITH YOUR CENTER OF MASS.

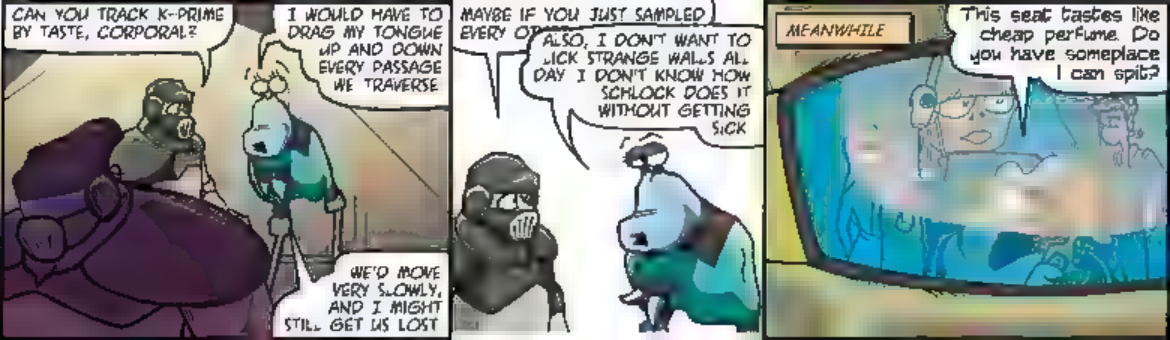


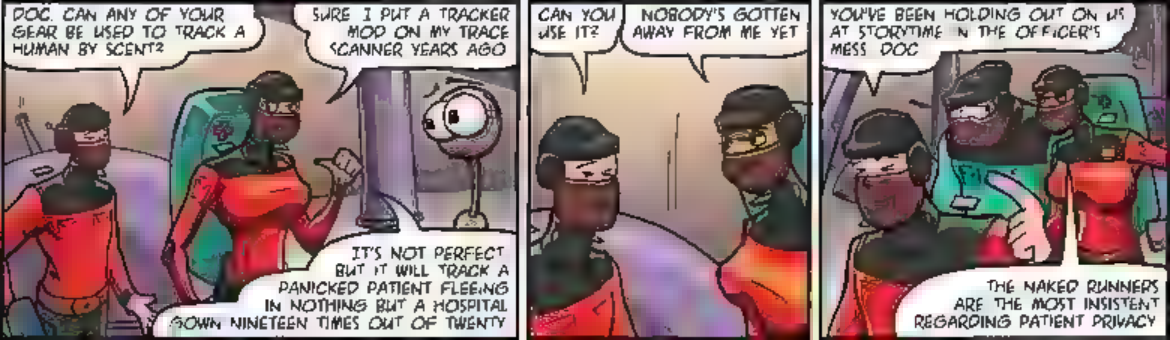




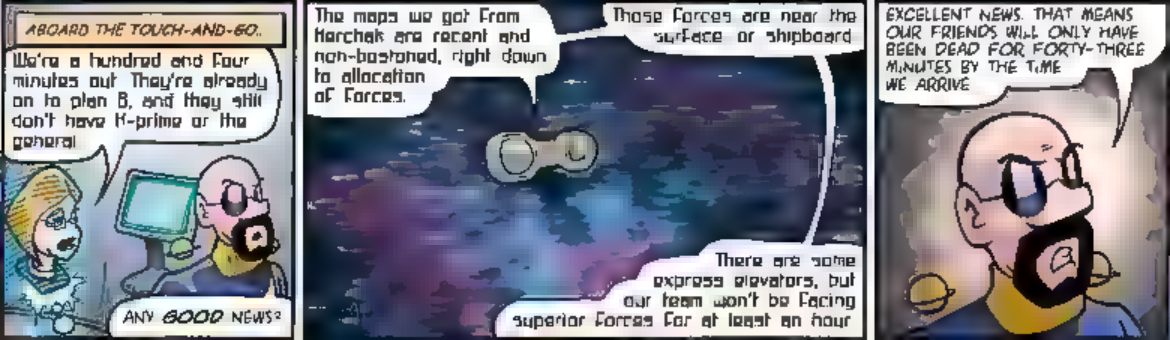
SWEEP
THEY'RE NOT HERE

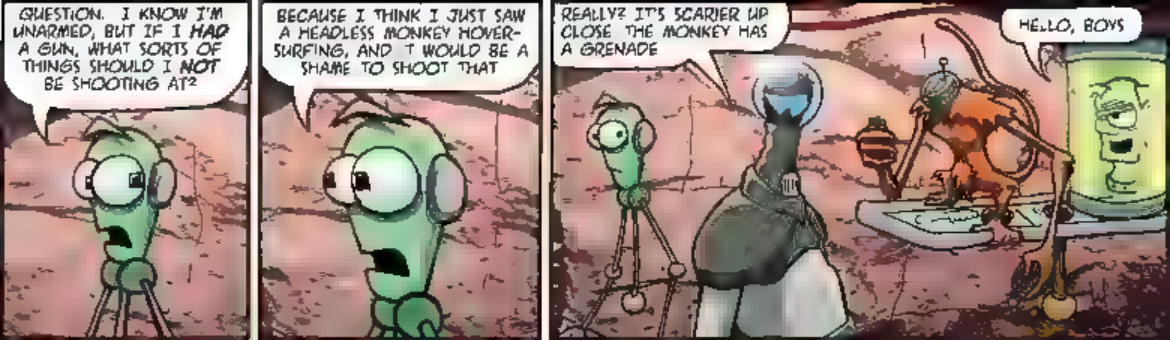

CRAP WERE THEY EVER HERE?
GIVE ME A MOMENT
WHAT ARE YOEEEUGH?
HUMAN THWEAT FEAR PHEROMONETH "ANTHIENT THPICE" CREAM THAVE
I M PRETTY THURE KEWYN ANDREYATHN WATH :N HERE TODAY
HOW EXACTLY DO YOU KNOW WHAT MY BOYFRIEND'S CLONE TASTES LIKE?
WELL, I ATHUME HE TATHTES LIKE YOUR BOYFRIEND, COMMANDER.

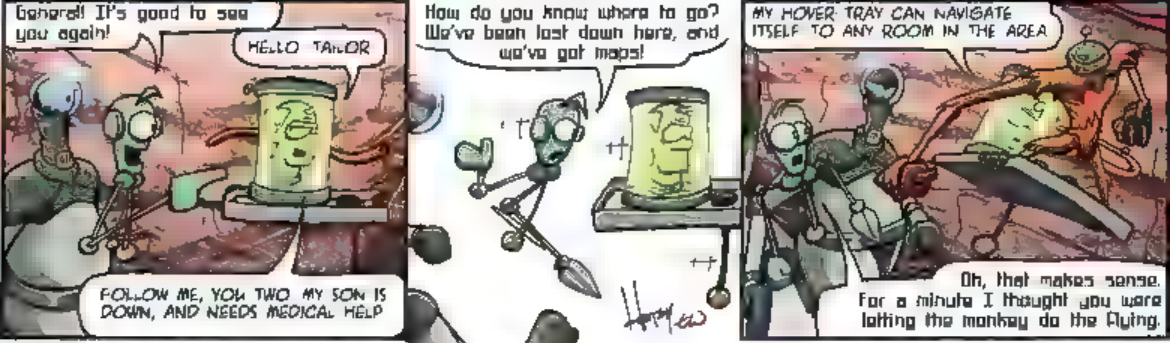

CAN YOU TRACK K-PRIME BY TASTE, CORPORAL?
I WOULD HAVE TO DRAG MY TONGUE UP AND DOWN EVERY PASSAGE WE TRAVERSE
WE'D MOVE VERY SLOWLY, AND I MIGHT STILL GET US LOST
MAYBE IF YOU JUST SAMPLED EVERY OT
ALSO, I DON'T WANT TO LICK STRANGE WALLS ALL DAY I DON'T KNOW HOW SCHLOCK DOES IT WITHOUT GETTING SICK
MEANWHILE
This seat tastes like cheap perfume. Do you have someplace I can spit?

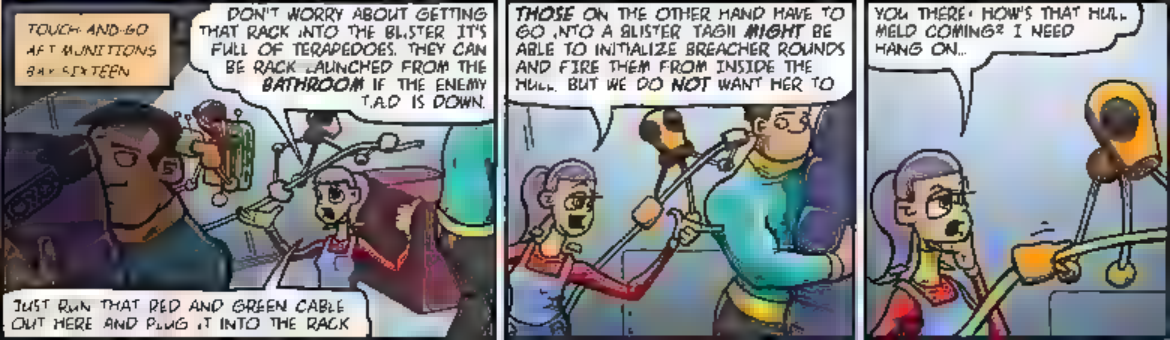

DOC. CAN ANY OF YOUR GEAR BE USED TO TRACK A HUMAN BY SCENT?
SURE I PUT A TRACKER MOD ON MY TRACE SCANNER YEARS AGO
IT'S NOT PERFECT BUT IT WILL TRACK A PANICKED PATIENT FLEEING IN NOTHING BUT A HOSPITAL GOWN NINETEEN TIMES OUT OF TWENTY
CAN YOU USE IT?
NOBODY'S GOTTEN AWAY FROM ME YET
YOU'VE BEEN HOLDING OUT ON US AT STORYTIME IN THE OFFICER'S MESS DOC
THE NAKED RUNNERS ARE THE MOST INSISTENT REGARDING PATIENT PRIVACY

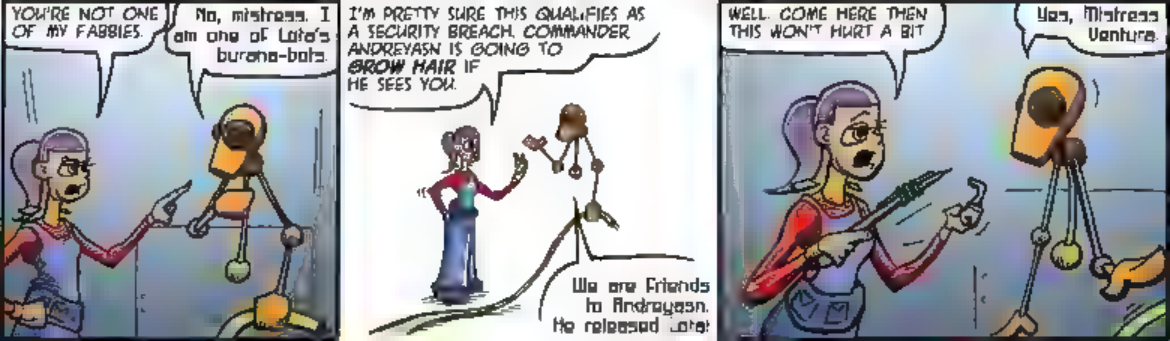

SHODAN'S TEAM IS ON HIS WAY TO HELP US BUNNI'S GEAR CAN TRACK K-PRIME BY SMELL
WHO'S HE LEAVING BEHIND TO HOLD THE EXIT COMMANDER?
HE'S NOT THE TERAPORT CAGE IS GONE. WE'RE ON TO PLAN B, WHICH MEANS WE'RE BETTER OFF REGROUPING.
COMMANDER, THE STUFF WE NEED TO BLOW UP FOR PLAN B TO WORK DID YOU KNOW .T'S SIX KILOMETERS AWAY FROM HERE?
HMMPH PARIS LOOKED SMALLER THAN THAT ON THESE TINY MAPS


ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO.
We're a hundred and four minutes out. They're already on to plan B, and they still don't have K-prime or the general.
ANY GOOD NEWS?
The maps we got from Korchak are recent and non-bastoned, right down to allocation of forces.
Those forces are near the surface or shipboard.
There are some express elevators, but our team won't be facing superior forces for at least an hour.
EXCELLENT NEWS. THAT MEANS OUR FRIENDS WILL ONLY HAVE BEEN DEAD FOR FORTY-THREE MINUTES BY THE TIME WE ARRIVE

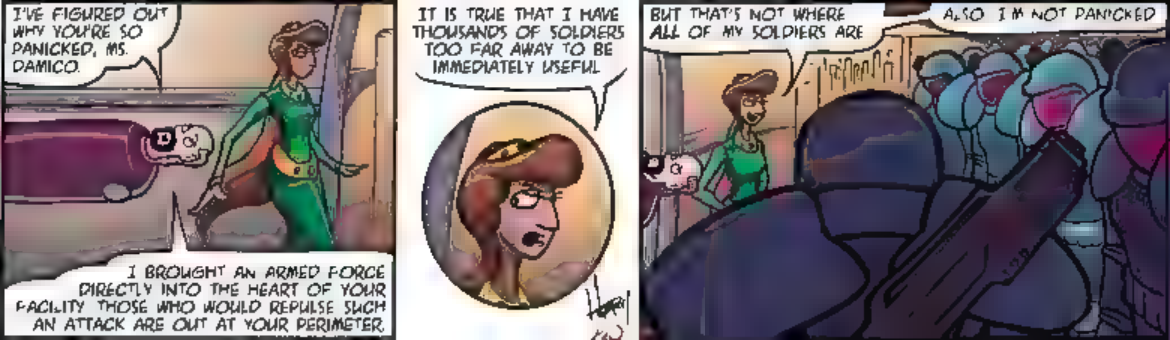

QUESTION. I KNOW I'M UNARMED, BUT IF I HAD A GUN, WHAT SORTS OF THINGS SHOULD I NOT BE SHOOTING AT?
BECAUSE I THINK I JUST SAW A HEADLESS MONKEY HOVER-SURFING, AND I WOULD BE A SHAME TO SHOOT THAT
REALLY? IT'S SCARIER UP CLOSE THE MONKEY HAS A GRENADE
HELLO, BOYS

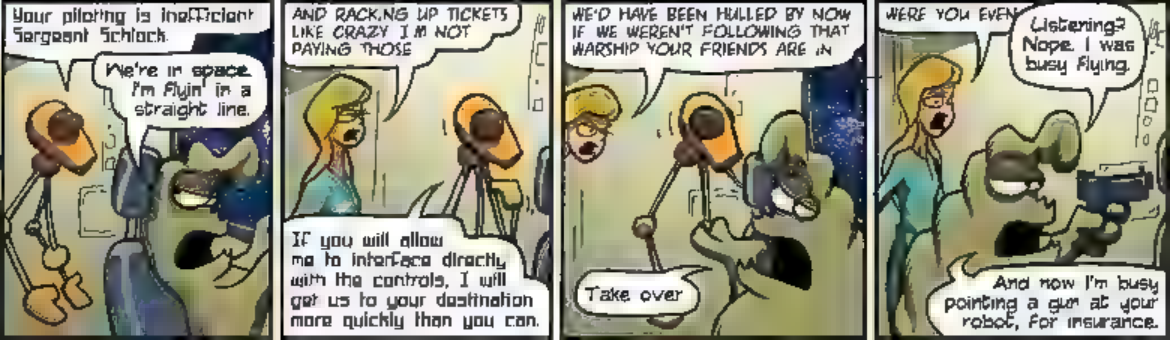

Gahgrel! It's good to see you again!
HELLO TAILOR
FOLLOW ME, YOU TWO. MY SON IS DOWN, AND NEEDS MEDICAL HELP
How do you know where to go? We've been last down here, and we've got maps!
MY HOVER TRAY CAN NAVIGATE ITSELF TO ANY ROOM IN THE AREA
Oh, that makes sense. For a minute I thought you were letting the monkey do the flying.

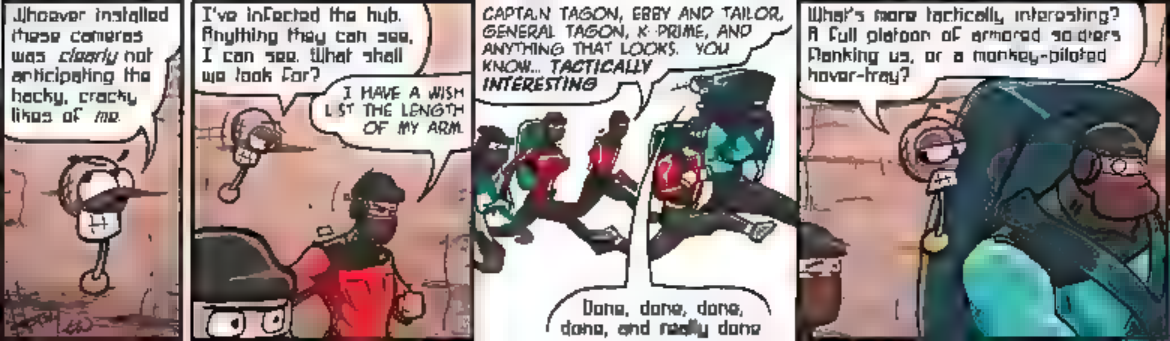

TOUCH-AND-GO
AFT MUNITIONS
BAY SIXTEEN
DON'T WORRY ABOUT GETTING THAT RACK INTO THE BLISTER IT'S FULL OF TERAPEDOES. THEY CAN BE RACK LAUNCHED FROM THE BATHROOM IF THE ENEMY T.A.D IS DOWN.
JUST RUN THAT RED AND GREEN CABLE OUT HERE AND PLUG IT INTO THE RACK
THOSE ON THE OTHER HAND HAVE TO GO INTO A BLISTER TAGH MIGHT BE ABLE TO INITIALIZE BREACHER ROUNDS AND FIRE THEM FROM INSIDE THE HULL. BUT WE DO NOT WANT HER TO
YOU THERE! HOW'S THAT HULL MELD COMING? I NEED HANG ON...


YOU'RE NOT ONE OF MY FABBIES.
No, mistress. I am one of Lota's buroha-bots.
I'M PRETTY SURE THIS QUALIFIES AS A SECURITY BREACH. COMMANDER ANDREYASN IS GOING TO GROW HAIR IF HE SEES YOU.
We are Friends to Andreyasn. He released Lota!
WELL. COME HERE THEN THIS WON'T HURT A BIT
Yes, Mistress Venture.


GNNNHH ARRH!
OKAY MAYBE I LED
TAC BRIDGE FIVE MINUTES LATER.
How may I serve?
I DUMPED IT WIPED IT AND SENT YOU THE GESTALT
REGARDLESS OF WHAT IT WAS BEFORE, IT IS COMPLETELY CLEAN NOW CAN I KEEP IT?
EXTERIOR FROM: TWO MINUTES LATER
I am ablative armor! Life is boring, then briefly exciting, then over! I am ablative armor! Life is boring, then briefly


I'VE FIGURED OUT WHY YOU'RE SO PANICKED, MS. DAMICO.
I BROUGHT AN ARMED FORCE DIRECTLY INTO THE HEART OF YOUR FACILITY. THOSE WHO WOULD REPULSE SUCH AN ATTACK ARE OUT AT YOUR PERIMETER.
IT IS TRUE THAT I HAVE THOUSANDS OF SOLDIERS TOO FAR AWAY TO BE IMMEDIATELY USEFUL
BUT THAT'S NOT WHERE ALL OF MY SOLDIERS ARE
ALSO I'M NOT PANICKED

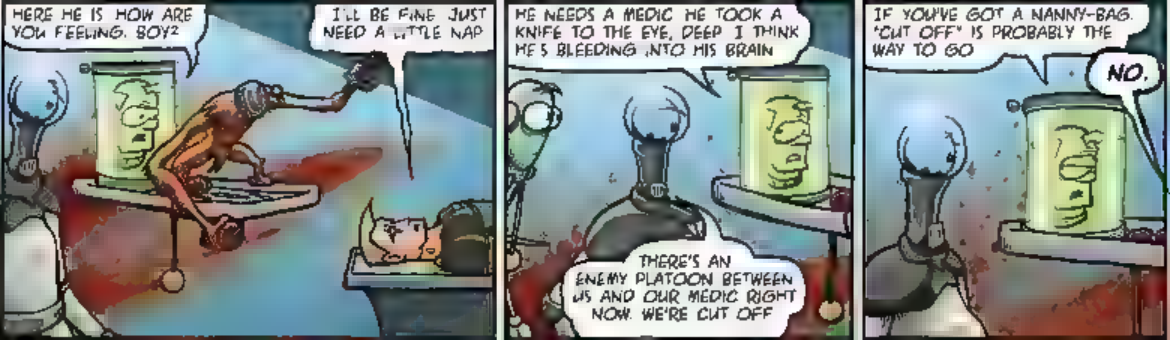

Your piloting is inefficient Sergeant Schlock.
We're in space. I'm flyin' in a straight line.
AND RACKING UP TICKETS LIKE CRAZY I'M NOT PAYING THOSE
If you will allow me to interface directly with the controls, I will get us to your destination more quickly than you can.
WE'D HAVE BEEN HULLED BY NOW IF WE WEREN'T FOLLOWING THAT WARSHIP YOUR FRIENDS ARE IN
Take over
WERE YOU EVEN
Listening? Nope. I was busy flying.
And now I'm busy pointing a gun at your robot, for insurance.

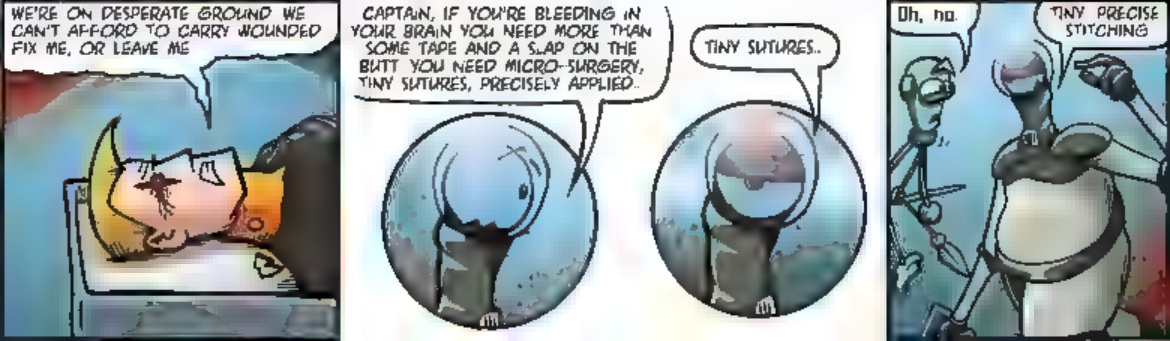

Whoever installed these cameras was *clearly* not anticipating the hacky, cracky likes of *me*.
I've infected the hub. Anything they can see, I can see. What shall we look for?
I HAVE A WISH LIST THE LENGTH OF MY ARM.
CAPTAIN TAGON, EBBY AND TAILOR, GENERAL TAGON, K-PRIME, AND ANYTHING THAT LOOKS. YOU KNOW... ***TACTICALLY INTERESTING***
Done, done, done, done, and really done
What's more tactically interesting? A full platoon of armored soldiers flanking us, or a monkey-piloted hover-tray?


COMMANDER, ENNESBY JUST HACKED THEIR CAMERAS, AND WE'VE FOUND EVERYBODY
MY TEAM WILL ARRIVE AT YOUR LOCATION IN ABOUT A MINUTE
FINALLY, SOME GOOD NEWS!
BUT WE'VE BEEN MOVING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION, CAPTAIN TAGON IS DOWN, AND THERE ARE NOW THIRTY HEAVY INFANTRY MOVING TO FLANK US.
Well? Does she have orders for us?
IF WE SURVIVE THIS, PLEASE REMIND ME TO TEACH COMMANDER FOXWORTHY SOME NEW OBSCENITIES SHE STARTED REPEATING HERSELF PRETTY QUICKLY


IF WE'VE GOT K PRIME ON CAMERA, YOU DON'T NEED ME TRYING TO TRACK HIM VIA SCENT
YOU'RE RIGHT WE DON'T
What we *do* need is for you to render some medical assistance to Captain Tagon.
He's unconscious, and it looks like he's been stabbed in the eye.
I AGREE ENNESBY, LEAD NICK AND THE DOCTOR TO THE CAPTAIN.
No, wait Never mind
NEVER MIND WHAT, DID HE GROW A NEW EYE?
No the passage between us and him just grew a platoon of enemy infantry.


SIR, IF THAT PLATOON IS FOLLOWING US I THINK YOU SHOULD ORDER ME TO BOOBY-TRAP THIS PASSAGE WITH THREE PROX-TRIGGERED A/P CHARGES.
THAT'S ODDLY SPECIFIC. HOW QUICKLY CAN YOU BE DONE?
TEN SECONDS AGO
EVERYBODY RUN FASTER!


HERE HE IS. HOW ARE YOU FEELING, BOY?
I'LL BE FINE. JUST NEED A LITTLE NAP
HE NEEDS A MEDIC. HE TOOK A KNIFE TO THE EYE, DEEP. I THINK HE'S BLEEDING INTO HIS BRAIN
THERE'S AN ENEMY PLATOON BETWEEN US AND OUR MEDIC RIGHT NOW. WE'RE CUT OFF
IF YOU'VE GOT A NANNY-BAG, "CUT OFF" IS PROBABLY THE WAY TO GO
NO.

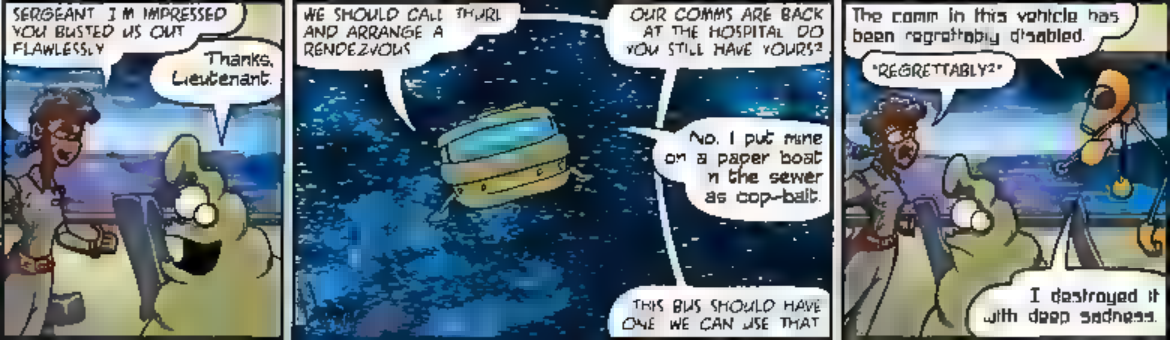

WE'RE ON DESPERATE GROUND WE CAN'T AFFORD TO CARRY WOUNDED FIX ME, OR LEAVE ME
CAPTAIN, IF YOU'RE BLEEDING IN YOUR BRAIN YOU NEED MORE THAN SOME TAPE AND A SLAP ON THE BUTT YOU NEED MICRO-SURGERY, TINY SUTURES, PRECISELY APPLIED..
TINY SUTURES..
Oh, no.
TINY PRECISE STITCHING

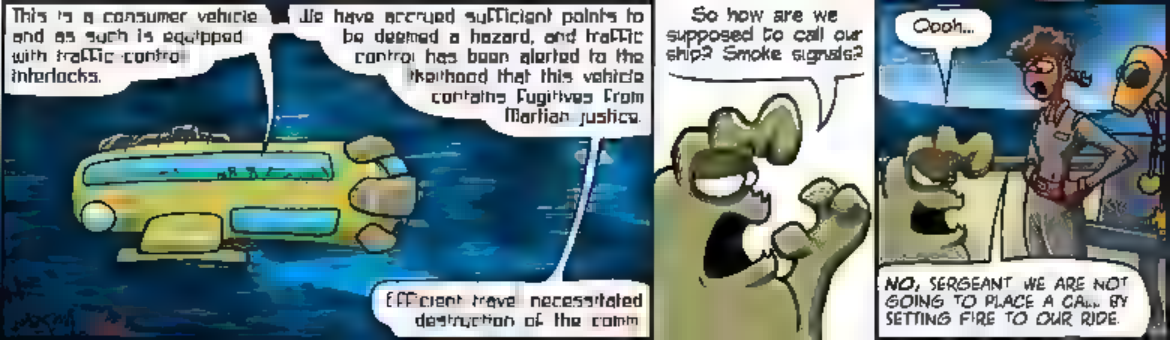

I'm a clothier, not a doctor
YEAH, BUT YOU CAN SEW! I THINK I KNOW ENOUGH XENOANATOMY TO POINT YOU AT THE RIGHT BLOOD VESSELS.
WE CAN DO THIS. IT'S NOT UHHHH...
"It's not rocket science?"
EXACTLY. IT'S NOT ROCKET SCIENCE


MOVE, MOVE, MOVE!
THEY'LL BE TRIPPING T ANY SECOND NOW
WHY ARE YOU SLOWING DOWN?
LET'S NOT GET TOO FAR PAST MINIMUM SAFE DISTANCE.
I LIKE TO BE ABLE TO FEEL THESE THINGS

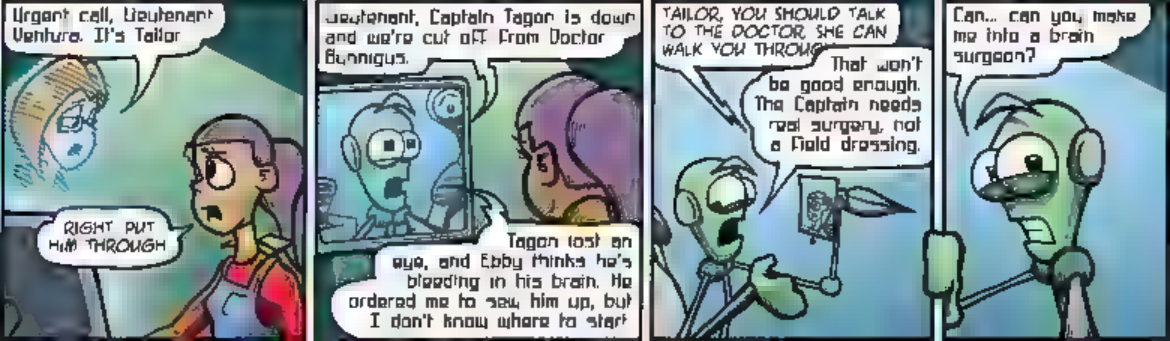

HMPH
WHAT?
TO ECHO ONE OF THE ANCIENT MARTIAN TERRAFORMING PIONEERS, "WHERE IS THE EARTH-SHATTERING KABOOM?"


WE'VE WAITED LONG ENOUGH MOVE!
BUT
THEY MUST HAVE FOUND YOUR MINES AND DISABLED THEM. WE NEED TO KEEP RUNNING.
BUT..
MOVE!
WHAT IF THERE'S AN EXPLOSION AND I MISS IT?
I SLEPT THROUGH CHRISTMAS ONCE

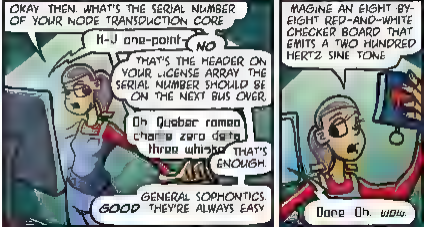

SERGEANT I AM IMPRESSED YOU BUSTED US OUT FLAWLESSLY
Thanks, Lieutenant.
WE SHOULD CALL THURL AND ARRANGE A RENDEZVOUS
OUR COMMS ARE BACK AT THE HOSPITAL DO YOU STILL HAVE YOURS?
No. I put mine on a paper boat in the sewer as cop-bait.
THIS BUS SHOULD HAVE ONE WE CAN USE THAT
The comm in this vehicle has been regrettably disabled.
"REGRETTABLY?"
I destroyed it with deep sadness.


This is a consumer vehicle and as such is equipped with traffic control interlocks.
We have accrued sufficient points to be deemed a hazard, and traffic control has been alerted to the likelihood that this vehicle contains fugitives from Martian justice.
Efficient travel necessitated destruction of the comm
So how are we supposed to call our ship? Smoke signals?
Oooh...
NO, SERGEANT. WE ARE NOT GOING TO PLACE A CALL BY SETTING FIRE TO OUR RIDE.

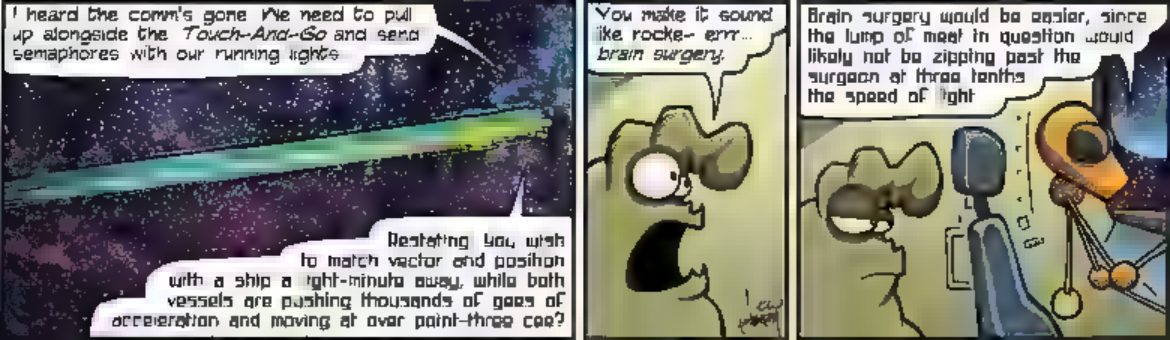

Okay, Lieutenant Ebbirnoth. Tell me where to cut, and where to stitch.
HRMMM.
SORRY. MY TEXTBOOKS LED ME TO EXPECT THE HUMAN BRAIN TO BE COLOR-CODED, WITH NICE LABELS ON THE IMPORTANT BITS.

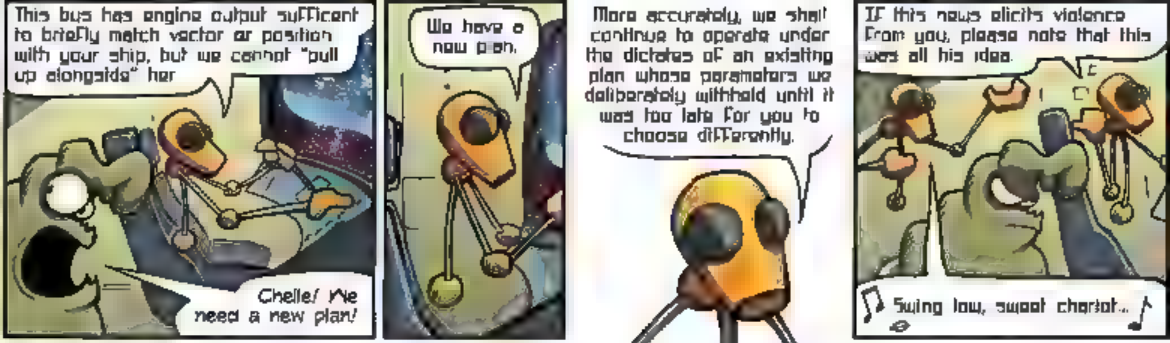

Urgent call, Lieutenant Venture. It's Tailor
RIGHT PUT HIM THROUGH
Lieutenant, Captain Tagon is down and we're cut off from Doctor Bunnigus.
Tagon lost an eye, and Ebby thinks he's bleeding in his brain. He ordered me to sew him up, but I don't know where to start
TAILOR, YOU SHOULD TALK TO THE DOCTOR. SHE CAN WALK YOU THROUGH
That won't be good enough. The Captain needs real surgery, not a field dressing.
Can... can you make me into a brain surgeon?


DO YOU TRUST ME?
I'm horrified of you.
BUT YOU WANT ME TO DO THIS?
My Captain needs me to be something I'm not


OKAY THEN. WHAT'S THE SERIAL NUMBER OF YOUR NODE TRANSDUCTION CORE
H-J one-point-
NO
THAT'S THE HEADER ON YOUR LICENSE ARRAY. THE SERIAL NUMBER SHOULD BE ON THE NEXT BUS OVER.
Oh. Quabar ramba charma zarra darra. Hiroo whirba.
THAT'S ENOUGH.
GENERAL SOPHONTICS. GOOD. THEY'RE ALWAYS EASY.
IMAGINE AN EIGHT-BY-EIGHT RED-AND-WHITE CHECKER BOARD THAT EMITS A TWO HUNDRED HERTZ SINE TONE
Done. Oh. WOW.

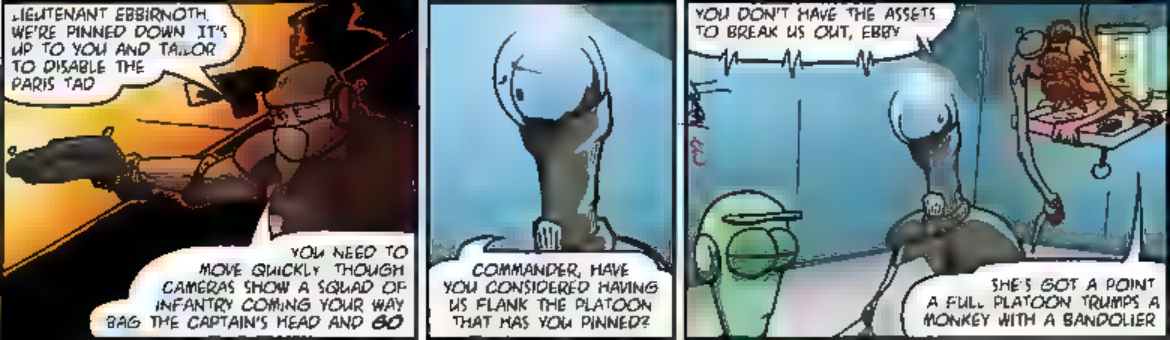

I now have bulk rewrite access to everything I know.
START ERASING. I DON'T KNOW WHICH MED MODULES YOU'LL NEED SO I'M GOING TO GIVE YOU ALL OF THEM. THEY TAKE UP A LOT OF SPACE.
But . I can't decide! How can I just kill pieces of my self?
AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SERIAL ARRAY THERE'S A REMOTE ACCESS CODE. SEND ME THAT AND I'LL DO THE ERASING FOR YOU.
Pare.. will I trust you more when this is over?
WILL IT REALLY BE "TRUST" IF I HARD-CODE IT?

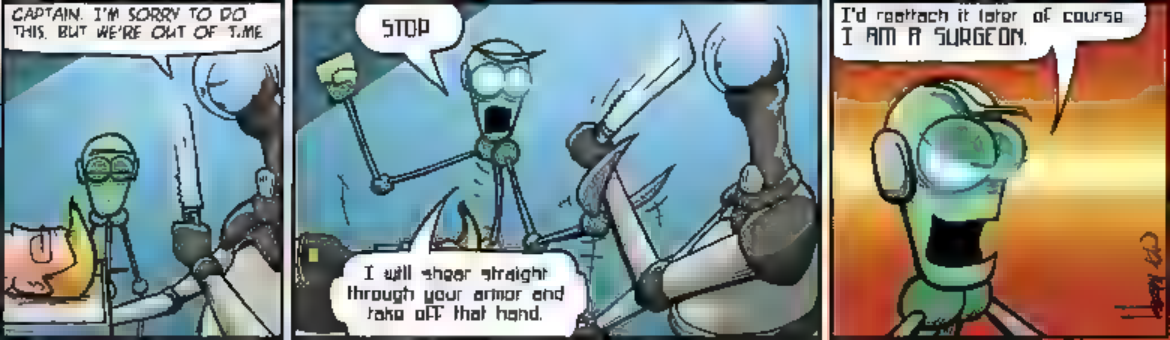

I heard the comm's gone. We need to pull up alongside the *Touch-And-Go* and send semaphores with our running lights.
Restating you, wish to match vector and position with a ship a light-minute away, while both vessels are pushing thousands of gees of acceleration and moving at over point-three cee?
You make it sound like rocke- errr... *brain surgery.*
Brain surgery would be easier, since the lump of meat in question would likely not be zipping past the surgeon at three tenths the speed of light.

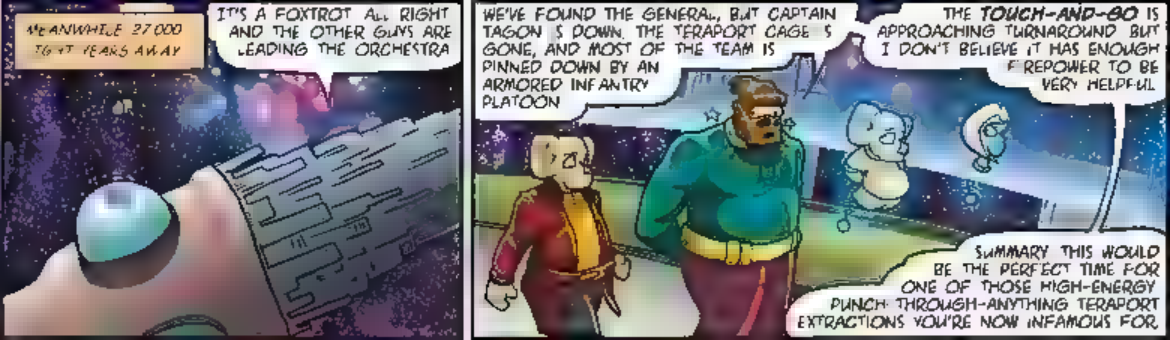

This bus has engine output sufficient to briefly match vector or position with your ship, but we cannot "pull up alongside" her
Chelle! We need a new plan!
We have a new plan.
More accurately, we shall continue to operate under the dictates of an existing plan whose parameters we deliberately withheld until it was too late for you to choose differently.
If this news elicits violence from you, please note that this was all his idea.
Swing low, sweet chariot...

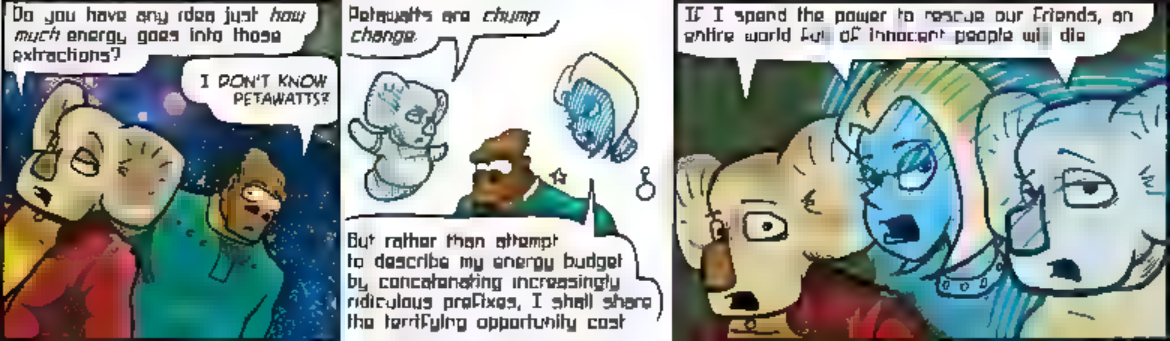

COMMANDER, THEY'RE NOT FAR BEHIND US
DON'T WORRY WE CAN HOLD THEM HERE
IT'S NARROW AND TWISTY FOR THAT LAST FORTY METERS OF APPROACH, WHICH SHOULD PREVENT THEM FROM BEING ABLE TO CONCENTRATE FIRE ON OUR POSITION.
WE'VE GOT PLENTY OF OPEN SPACE ON THIS SIDE, THOUGH. WE CAN CONCENTRATE FIRE, AND WE'VE GOT GOOD COVER
I DON'T SEE ANY EXITS
THIS POSITION DOES HAVE ONE OR TWO DRAWBACKS.

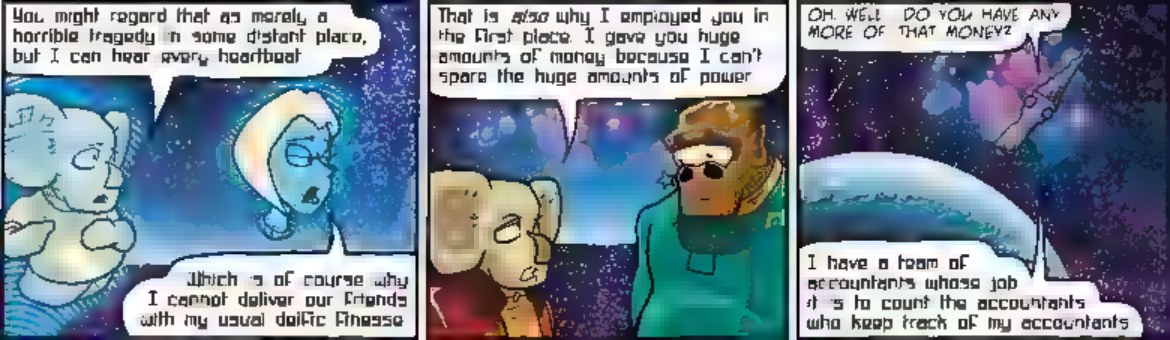

COMMANDER, A POSITION THAT PINS US DOWN IN A DEAD-END DOES NOT HAVE "DRAWBACKS."
WITHOUT EXITS, WE CAN'T SEND A TEAM TO DISABLE THE PARIS TAD, AND THAT MEANS NO EXTRACTION.
EBBY AND TAILOR AREN'T TRAPPED IN HERE. ONCE THEY BAG TAGON'S HEAD, I'LL SEND THEM TO TAKE CARE OF THE TAD
Tailor appears to be catatonic and Ebby is using scrap fabric to fashion a bandolier for a monkey.
THAT SOUNDS LIKE A PAIR OF TEAM MEMBERS IN NEED OF EXPLICIT ORDERS.


LIEUTENANT EBBIRNOTH, WE'RE PINNED DOWN IT'S UP TO YOU AND TAILOR TO DISABLE THE PARIS TAD
YOU NEED TO MOVE QUICKLY THOUGH CAMERAS SHOW A SQUAD OF INFANTRY COMING YOUR WAY BAG THE CAPTAIN'S HEAD AND GO
COMMANDER, HAVE YOU CONSIDERED HAVING US FLANK THE PLATOON THAT HAS YOU PINNED?
YOU DON'T HAVE THE ASSETS TO BREAK US OUT, EBBY
SHE'S GOT A POINT A FULL PLATOON TRUMPS A MONKEY WITH A BANDOLIER

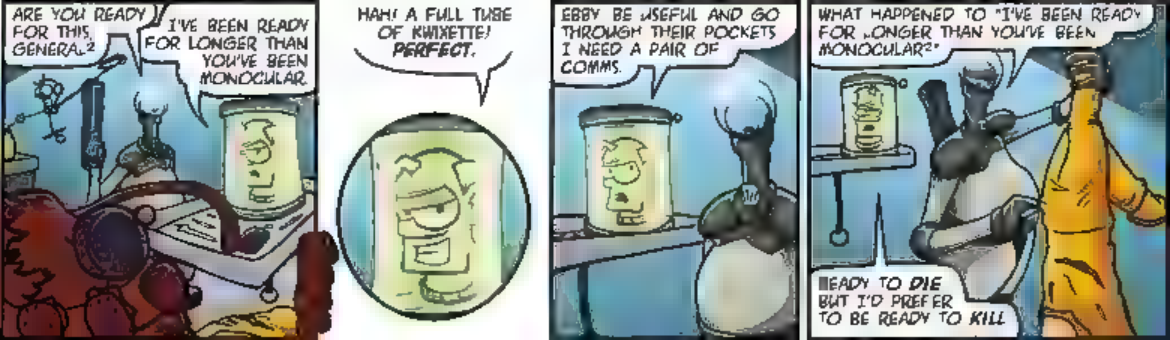

CAPTAIN. I'M SORRY TO DO THIS. BUT WE'RE OUT OF T.ME
STOP
I will shear straight through your armor and take off that hand.
I'd reattach it later of course I AM A SURGEON.

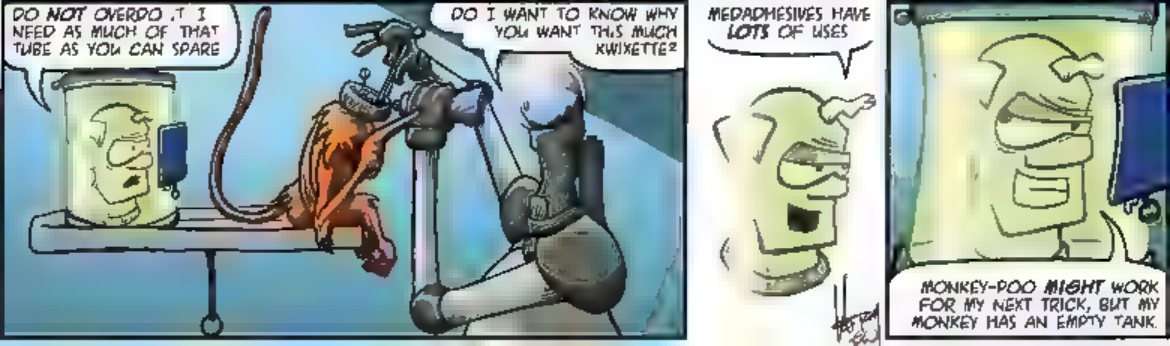

MEANWHILE 27000 LIGHT YEARS AWAY
IT'S A FOXTROT ALL RIGHT AND THE OTHER GUYS ARE LEADING THE ORCHESTRA
WE'VE FOUND THE GENERAL, BUT CAPTAIN TAGON'S DOWN. THE TERAPORT CAGE'S GONE, AND MOST OF THE TEAM IS PINNED DOWN BY AN ARMORED INFANTRY PLATOON
THE TOUCH-AND-GO IS APPROACHING TURNAROUND BUT I DON'T BELIEVE IT HAS ENOUGH FIREPOWER TO BE VERY HELPFUL
SUMMARY THIS WOULD BE THE PERFECT TIME FOR ONE OF THOSE HIGH-ENERGY PUNCH-THROUGH-ANYTHING TERAPORT EXTRACTIONS YOU'RE NOW INFAMOUS FOR

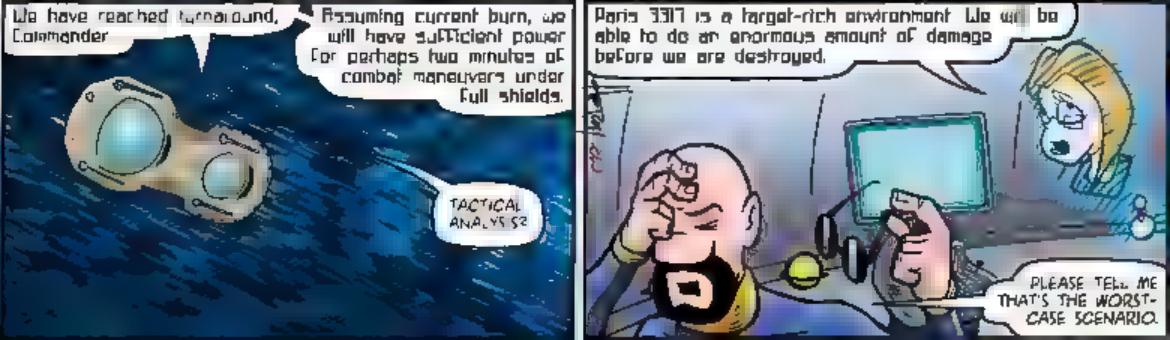

Do you have any idea just *how much* energy goes into those extractions?
I DON'T KNOW! PETAWATTS?
Petawatts are *chump change*.
But rather than attempt to describe my energy budget by concatenating increasingly ridiculous prefixes, I shall share the terrifying opportunity cost
If I spend the power to rescue our friends, an entire world full of innocent people will die

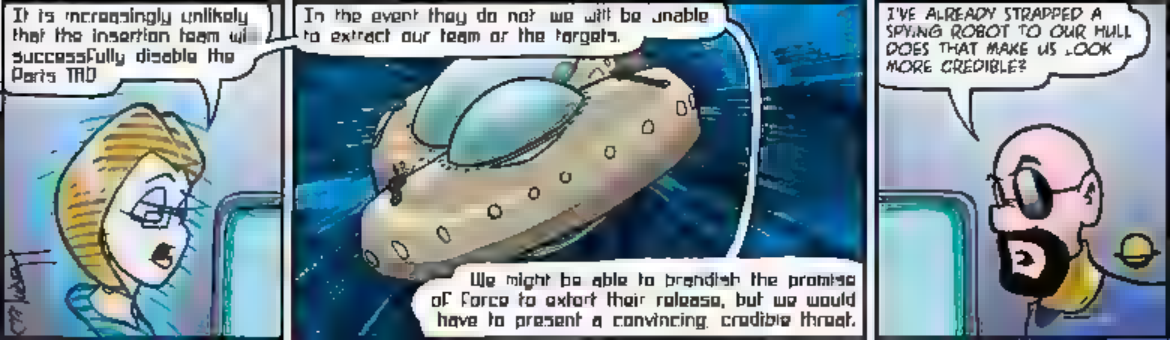

You might regard that as merely a horrible tragedy in some distant place, but I can hear every heartbeat
Which is of course why I cannot deliver our friends with my usual deific finesse
That is *also* why I employed you in the first place. I gave you huge amounts of money because I can't spare the huge amounts of power
OH. WELL. DO YOU HAVE ANY MORE OF THAT MONEY?
I have a team of accountants whose job it is to count the accountants who keep track of my accountants

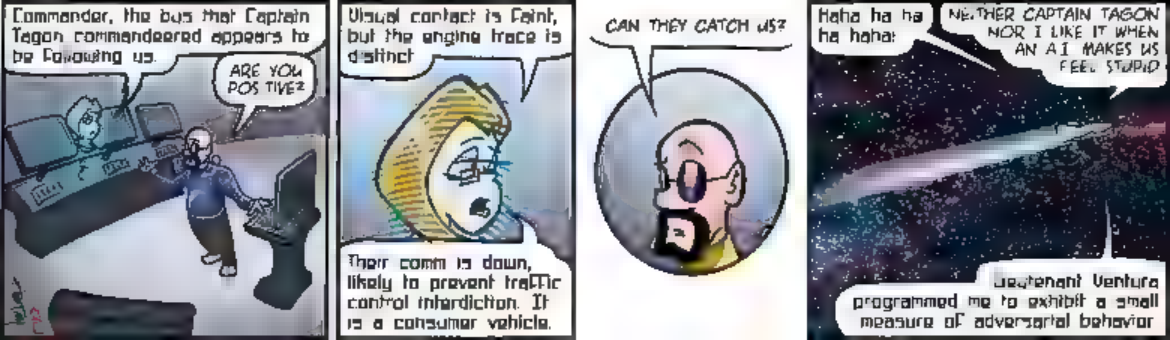

Ebby, check that closet at the back of the room. There might be some anesthesia.
TAILOR, THERE IS AN ENEMY SQUAD CLOSING ON OUR POSITION RIGHT NOW. YOU DON'T HAVE TIME TO OPERATE
Then take the General and his waldo-monkey and buy me more time.
I'll only need a couple of minutes. I have just decided to skip the part where I use anesthesia.
I FEEL FINE. I THINK I'LL GO FOR A WALK

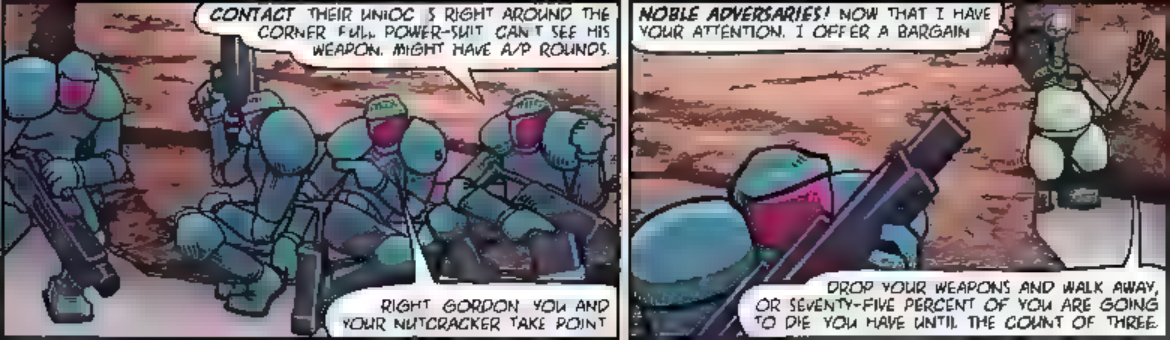

ARE YOU READY FOR THIS, GENERAL?
I'VE BEEN READY FOR LONGER THAN YOU'VE BEEN MONOCULAR.
HAH! A FULL TUBE OF KWIXETTE! PERFECT.
EBBY BE USEFUL AND GO THROUGH THEIR POCKETS I NEED A PAIR OF COMMS.
WHAT HAPPENED TO "I'VE BEEN READY FOR LONGER THAN YOU'VE BEEN MONOCULAR?"
READY TO DIE BUT I'D PREFER TO BE READY TO KILL

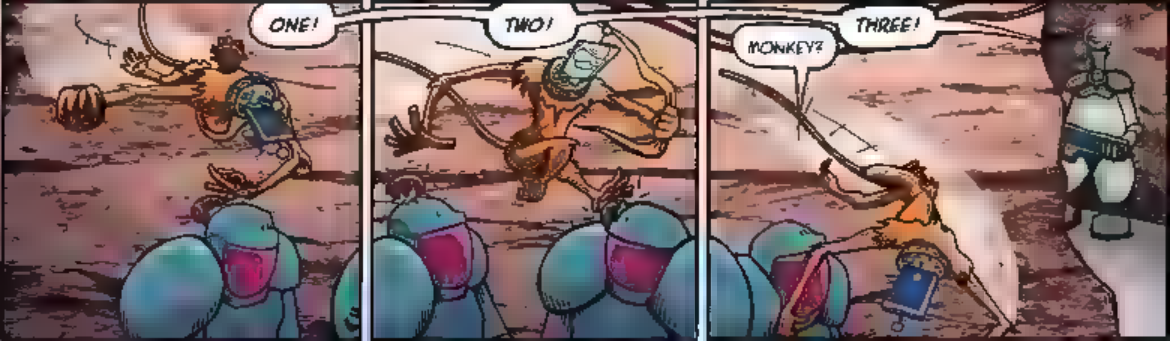

DO NOT OVERDO IT. I NEED AS MUCH OF THAT TUBE AS YOU CAN SPARE
DO I WANT TO KNOW WHY YOU WANT THIS MUCH KWIXETTE?
MEDAPHESIVES HAVE LOTS OF USES
MONKEY-POO MIGHT WORK FOR MY NEXT TRICK, BUT MY MONKEY HAS AN EMPTY TANK.


We have reached turnaround, Commander.
Assuming current burn, we will have sufficient power for perhaps two minutes of combat maneuvers under full shields.
TACTICAL ANALYSIS?
Paris 3317 is a target-rich environment. We will be able to do an enormous amount of damage before we are destroyed.
PLEASE TELL ME THAT'S THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO.


It is increasingly unlikely that the insertion team will successfully disable the Paris TRD
In the event they do not we will be unable to extract our team or the targets.
We might be able to brandish the promise of force to extort their release, but we would have to present a convincing, credible threat.
I'VE ALREADY STRAPPED A SPYING ROBOT TO OUR HULL DOES THAT MAKE US LOOK MORE CREDIBLE?

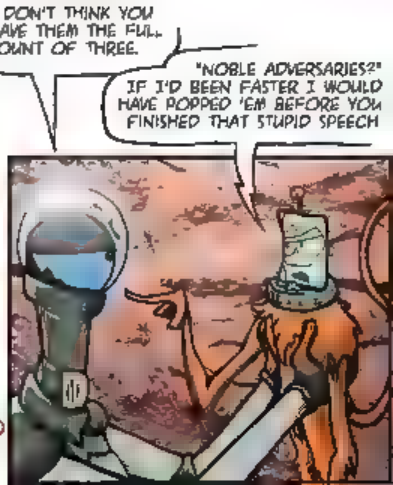

Commander, the bus that Captain Tagon commandeered appears to be following us.
ARE YOU POSITIVE?
Visual contact is faint, but the engine trace is distinct
Their comm is down, likely to prevent traffic control interdiction. It is a consumer vehicle.
CAN THEY CATCH US?
Haha ha ha ha haha!
NEITHER CAPTAIN TAGON NOR I LIKE IT WHEN AN A.I. MAKES US FEEL STUPID
Lieutenant Ventura programmed me to exhibit a small measure of adversarial behavior

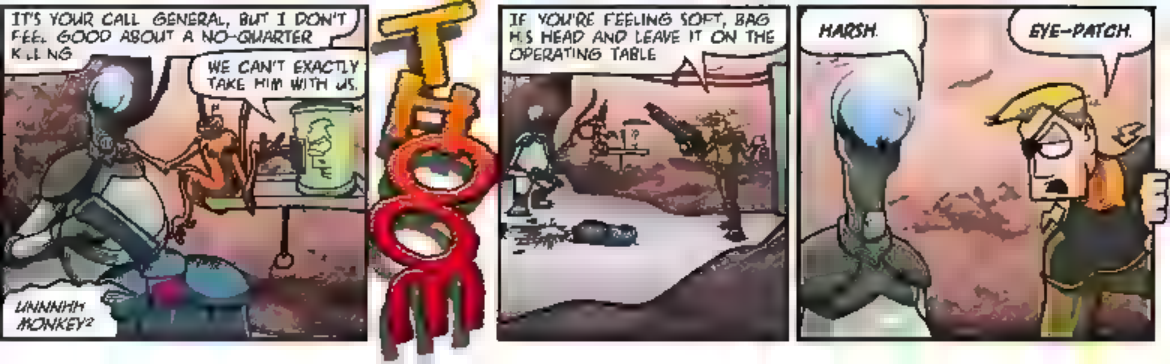

CONTACT THEIR UNIOC 5 RIGHT AROUND THE CORNER FULL POWER-SUIT CAN'T SEE HIS WEAPON. MIGHT HAVE A/P ROUNDS.
RIGHT GORDON YOU AND YOUR NUTCRACKER TAKE POINT
NOBLE ADVERSARIES! NOW THAT I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION. I OFFER A BARGAIN
DROP YOUR WEAPONS AND WALK AWAY, OR SEVENTY-FIVE PERCENT OF YOU ARE GOING TO DIE YOU HAVE UNTIL THE COUNT OF THREE.


ONE!
TWO!
MONKEY?
THREE!



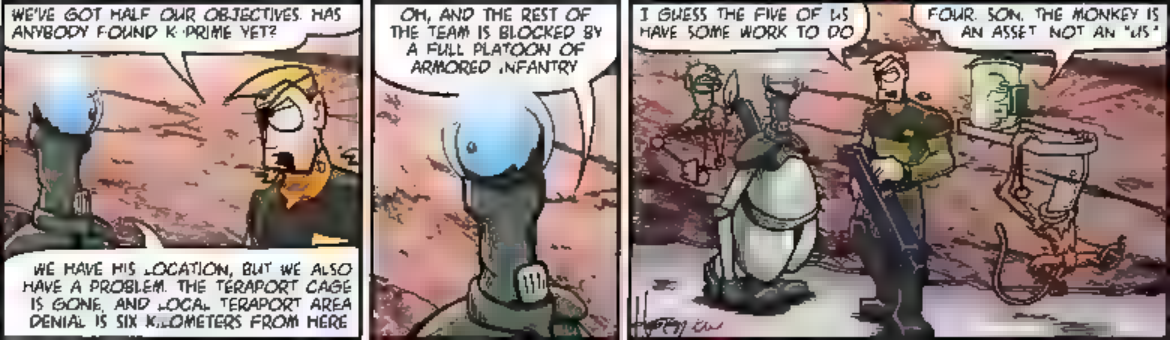


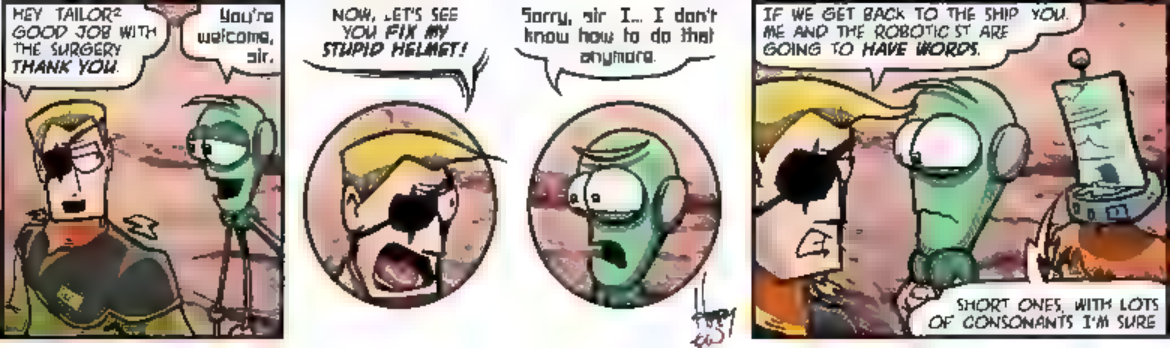

I DON'T THINK YOU GAVE THEM THE FULL COUNT OF THREE.
"NOBLE ADVERSARIES?" IF I'D BEEN FASTER I WOULD HAVE POPPED 'EM BEFORE YOU FINISHED THAT STUPID SPEECH

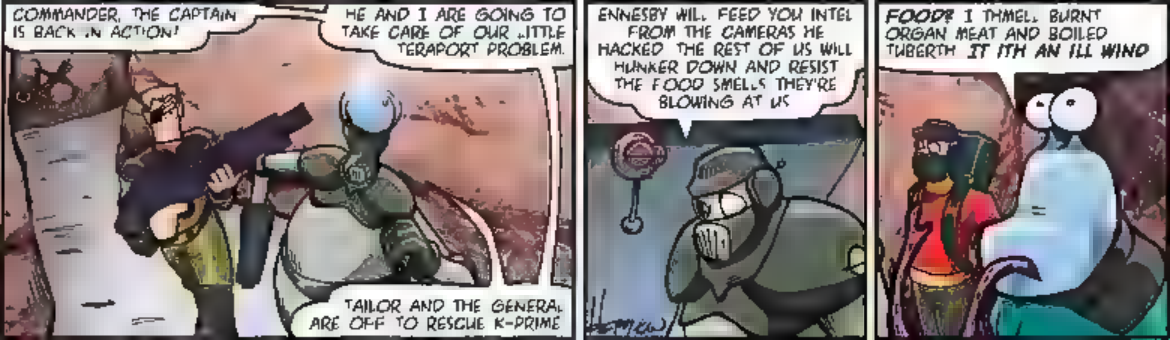

IT'S YOUR CALL GENERAL, BUT I DON'T FEEL GOOD ABOUT A NO-QUARTER K..L NG
WE CAN'T EXACTLY TAKE HIM WITH US.
UNNNHH MONKEY2
IF YOU'RE FEELING SOFT, BAG HIS HEAD AND LEAVE IT ON THE OPERATING TABLE
HARSH.
EYE-PATCH.

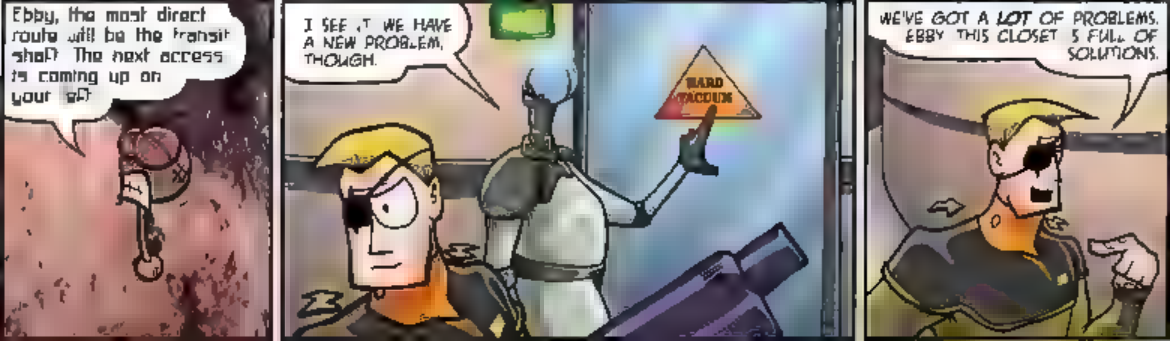

MS. DAMICO, WE'VE GOT MOST OF THEM TRAPPED AT THE END OF THE NEW DIG. BUT THEY'RE ALSO ENTRENCHED
ENTRENCHED? IN WHAT?
WE GOT A QUICK LOOK AT 'EM BEFORE THEY SHOT OUT THE CAMERAS
I THINK SOME IDIOT DECIDED TO STORE A STACK OF HULL PLATES IN THAT CHAMBER
OH. THAT WAS ME. THOSE ARE LEFTOVERS FROM ANOTHER PROJECT
CORRECTION. THAT ROOM IS A GREAT PLACE FOR HULLMETAL BARRICADES. LULL THE ENEMY INTO A FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY!


THAT CHOKE POINT WORKS BOTH WAYS, CAPTAIN
PULL YOUR PLATOON BACK. TAKE COVER, AND BE PATIENT. WE CAN AFFORD TO WAIT LONGER THAN THEY CAN.
NOW, PUT CORPORAL O'KEEFE ON. YOU SOLDIERS NEED SOME PSY-OPS SUPPORT
O'KEEFE ISN'T TRAINED FOR THAT. HE'S A COOK
AND WHEN O'KEEFE MAKES BANGERS AND MASH THE SMELL DRIVES HUNGRY MEN TO DESPERATION.


WE'VE GOT HALF OUR OBJECTIVES. HAS ANYBODY FOUND K-PRIME YET?
WE HAVE HIS LOCATION, BUT WE ALSO HAVE A PROBLEM. THE TERAPORT CAGE IS GONE, AND LOCAL TERAPORT AREA DENIAL IS SIX KILOMETERS FROM HERE
OH, AND THE REST OF THE TEAM IS BLOCKED BY A FULL PLATOON OF ARMORED INFANTRY
I GUESS THE FIVE OF US HAVE SOME WORK TO DO
FOUR. SON. THE MONKEY IS AN ASSET NOT AN "US."


HEY TAILOR² GOOD JOB WITH THE SURGERY THANK YOU.
You're welcome, sir.
NOW, LET'S SEE YOU FIX MY STUPID HELMET!
Sorry, sir I... I don't know how to do that anymore.
IF WE GET BACK TO THE SHIP YOU, ME AND THE ROBOTIC ST ARE GOING TO HAVE WORDS.
SHORT ONES, WITH LOTS OF CONSONANTS I'M SURE


COMMANDER, THE CAPTAIN IS BACK IN ACTION!
HE AND I ARE GOING TO TAKE CARE OF OUR LITTLE TERAPORT PROBLEM.
TAILOR AND THE GENERAL ARE OFF TO RESCUE K-PRIME
ENNESBY WILL FEED YOU INTEL FROM THE CAMERAS HE HACKED. THE REST OF US WILL HUNKER DOWN AND RESIST THE FOOD SMELLS THEY'RE BLOWING AT US
FOOD? I THMELL BURNT ORGAN MEAT AND BOILED TUBERTH IT ITH AN ILL WIND

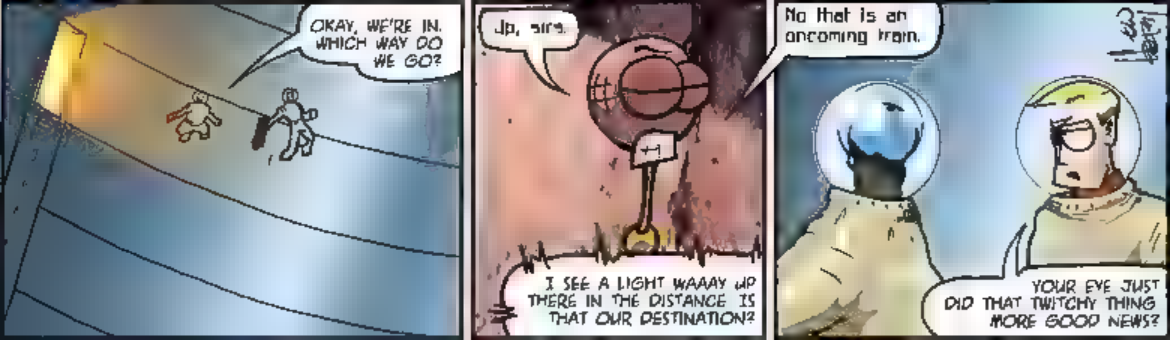

Ebby, the most direct route will be the transit shaft. The next access is coming up on your left.
I SEE. T WE HAVE A NEW PROBLEM, THOUGH.
HARD VACUUM
WE'VE GOT A LOT OF PROBLEMS, EBBY. THIS CLOSET S FULL OF SOLUTIONS.

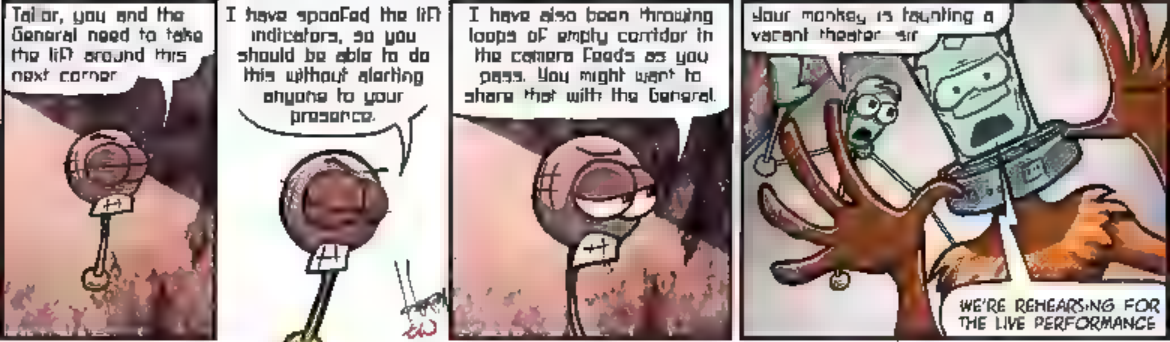
EMERGENCY VACUUM SUITS. JUST THE THING YOU'D EXPECT TO FIND NEXT TO AN AIRLOCK

THESE SUITS ARE BAGGY ENOUGH THAT YOU CAN PUT ONE ON OVER YOUR ARMOR. GRAB A COUPLE OF TOOLKITS, AND WE'RE DISGUISED AS TRANSIT TUNNEL REPAIRMEN.

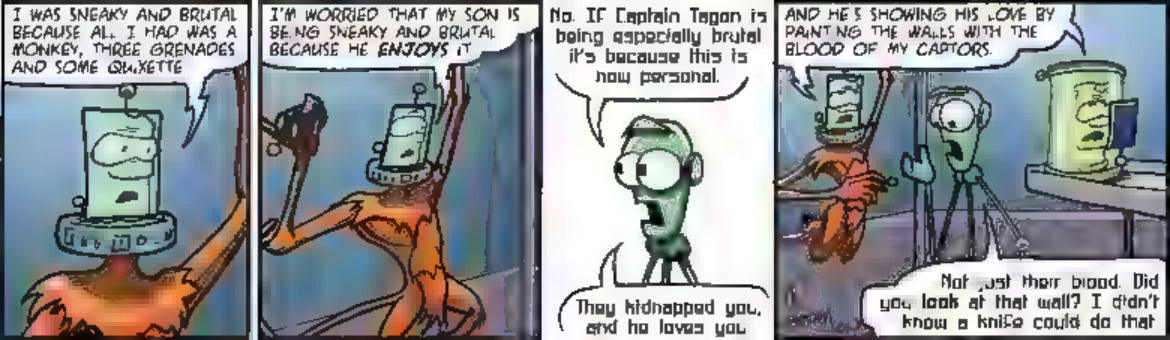


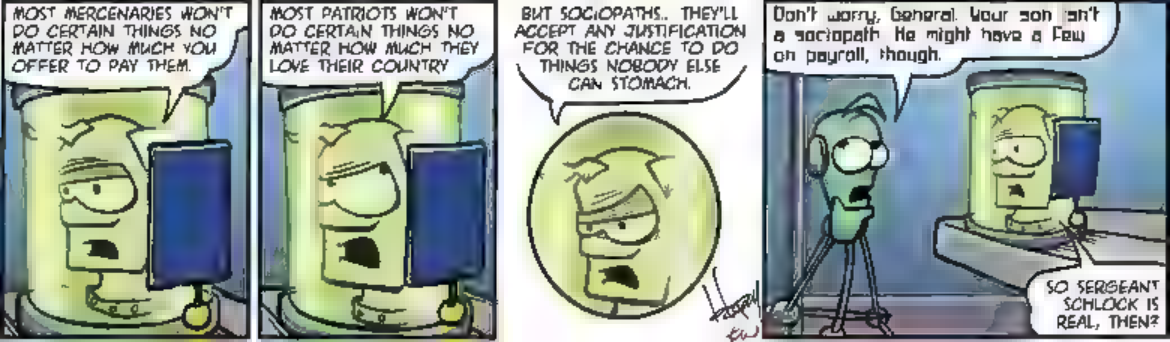
PROVIDED NOBODY GETS CLOSE ENOUGH TO MAKE EYE CONTACT

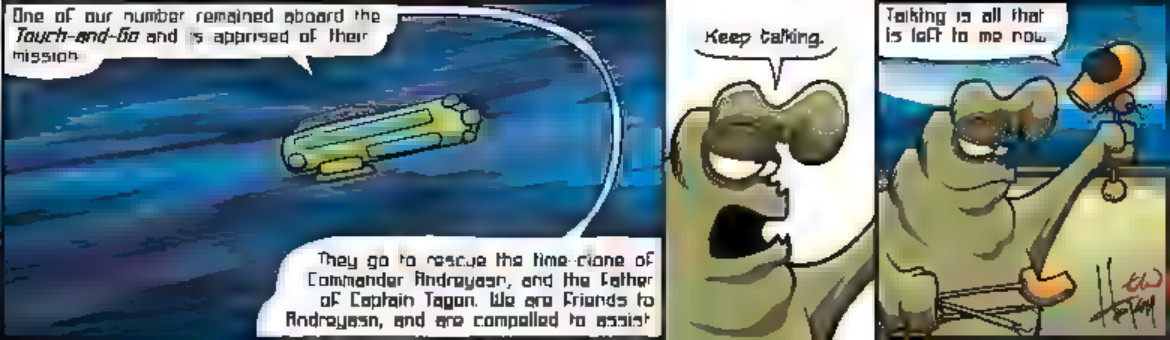

OKAY, WE'RE IN. WHICH WAY DO WE GO?
Up, sirs.
I SEE A LIGHT WAAAY UP THERE IN THE DISTANCE IS THAT OUR DESTINATION?
No that is an oncoming train.
YOUR EYE JUST DID THAT TWITCHY THING MORE GOOD NEWS?

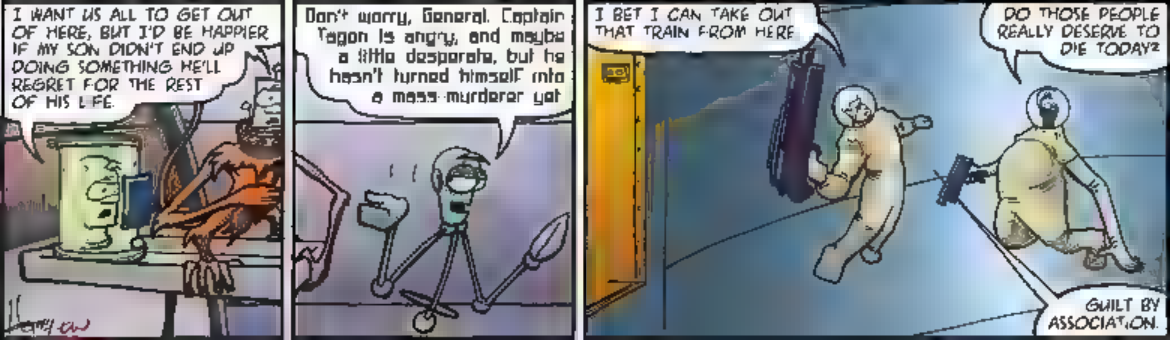

Tailor, you and the General need to take the lift around this next corner.
I have spoofed the lift indicators, so you should be able to do this without alerting anyone to your presence.
I have also been throwing loops of empty corridor in the camera feeds as you pass. You might want to share that with the General.
your monkey is taunting a variant theater air
WE'RE REHEARSING FOR THE LIVE PERFORMANCE

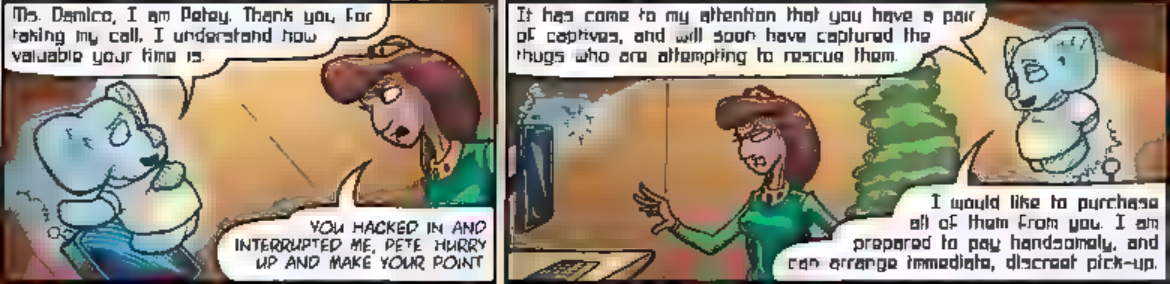

TAILOR, MY SON SEEMS A LITTLE ZEALOUS LATELY
Zealous? You mean the way he ended your discussion with Ebby about the prisoner?
AND THE KNIFE FIGHT THOSE GUYS HAD NO CHANCE AGAINST HIM.
Neither did that squad whose helmets you stuck grenades to
THAT WAS DIFFERENT. BLAME THE MONKEY FOR THAT
You start craving bananas and termites and I'm unplugging you.


I WAS SNEAKY AND BRUTAL BECAUSE AL. I HAD WAS A MONKEY, THREE GRENADES AND SOME QUIXETTE
I'M WORRIED THAT MY SON IS BEING SNEAKY AND BRUTAL BECAUSE HE ENJOYS IT
No. If Captain Tagon is being especially brutal it's because this is how personal.
They kidnapped you, and he loves you
AND HE'S SHOWING HIS LOVE BY PAINTING THE WALLS WITH THE BLOOD OF MY CAPTORS.
Not just their blood. Did you look at that wall? I didn't know a knife could do that

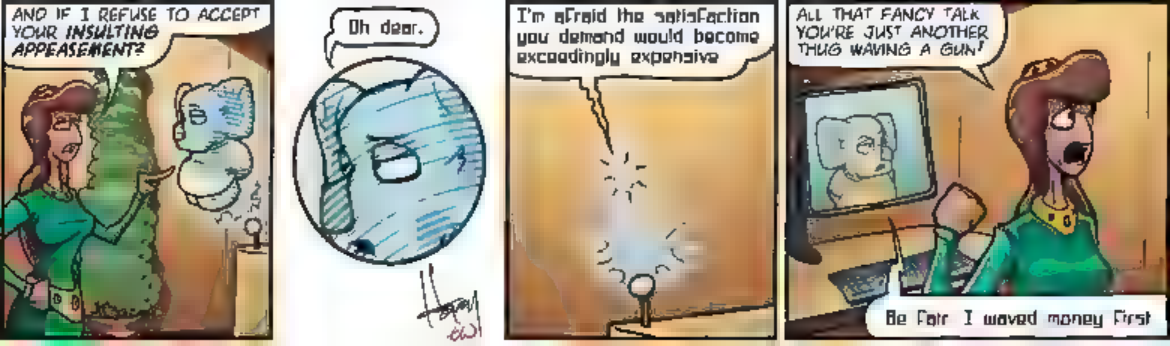

MOST MERCENARIES WON'T DO CERTAIN THINGS NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU OFFER TO PAY THEM.
MOST PATRIOTS WON'T DO CERTAIN THINGS NO MATTER HOW MUCH THEY LOVE THEIR COUNTRY
BUT SOCIOPATHS.. THEY'LL ACCEPT ANY JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CHANCE TO DO THINGS NOBODY ELSE CAN STOMACH.
Don't worry, General. Your son isn't a sociopath. He might have a few on payroll, though.
SO SERGEANT SCHLOCK IS REAL, THEN?

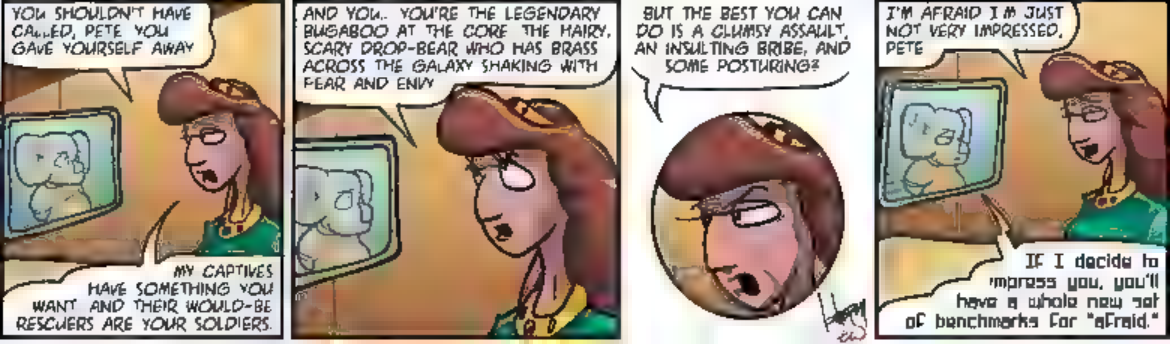

One of our number remained aboard the *Touch-and-Go* and is apprised of their mission.
They go to rescue the time-clone of Commander Andreyasn, and the father of Captain Tagon. We are friends to Andreyasn, and are compelled to assist
Keep talking.
Talking is all that is left to me now.

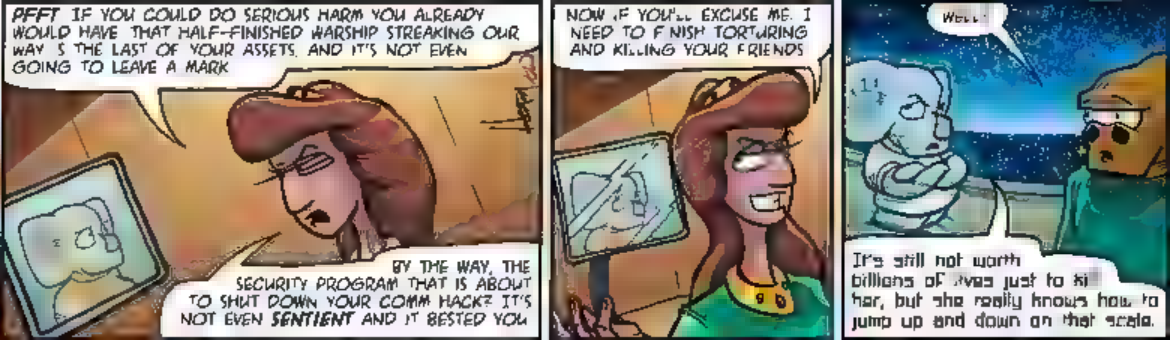

I WANT US ALL TO GET OUT OF HERE, BUT I'D BE HAPPIER IF MY SON DIDN'T END UP DOING SOMETHING HE'LL REGRET FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE.
Don't worry, General. Captain Tagon is angry, and maybe a little desperate, but he hasn't turned himself into a mass murderer yet
I BET I CAN TAKE OUT THAT TRAIN FROM HERE
DO THOSE PEOPLE REALLY DESERVE TO DIE TODAY?
GUILT BY ASSOCIATION.

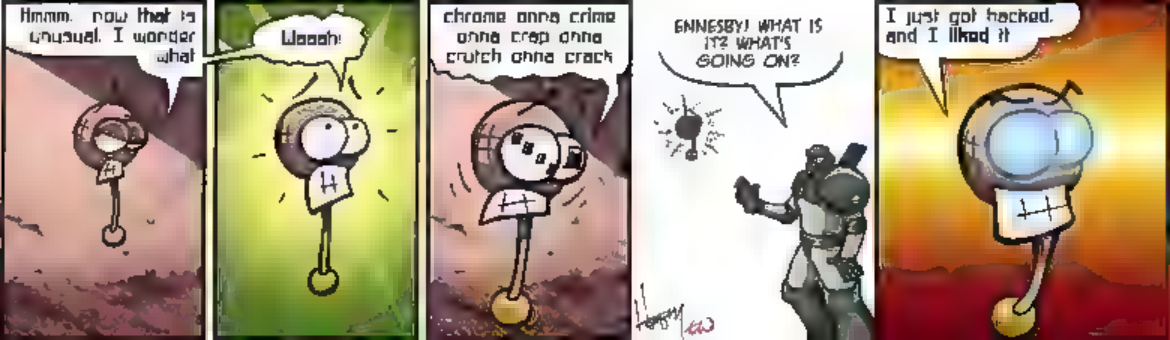

Ms. Demico, I am Petey. Thank you, for taking my call. I understand how valuable your time is.
YOU HACKED IN AND INTERRUPTED ME, PETE. HURRY UP AND MAKE YOUR POINT
It has come to my attention that you have a pair of captives, and will soon have captured the thugs who are attempting to rescue them.
I would like to purchase all of them from you. I am prepared to pay handsomely, and can arrange immediate, discreet pick-up.

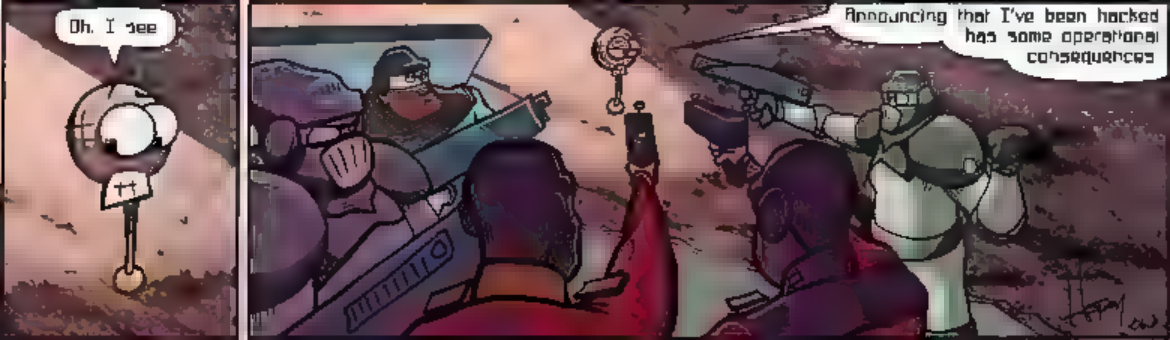

HOW HANDSOMELY?
Twenty-five times the sum Andreyasn stole from you.
HOW DISCREETLY?
Lower your anti-teraport defenses, and the parties in question will simply vanish.
ANDREYASN'S THEFT INSULTED ME. THESE THUGS HAVE KILLED MY PEOPLE.
I DEMAND SATISFACTION.
And you are entitled to that. Let us not forget, however, that you are also a shrewd businesswoman.
I have now established the opportunity cost for this "satisfaction," you desire. I earnestly hope to appeal to your more fiscally cunning side.

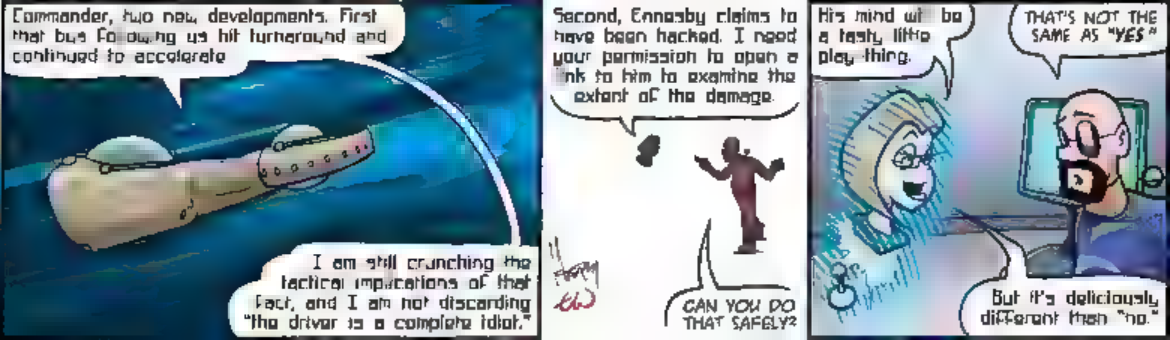

AND IF I REFUSE TO ACCEPT YOUR INSULTING APPEASEMENT?
Oh dear.
I'm afraid the satisfaction you demand would become exceedingly expensive
ALL THAT FANCY TALK YOU'RE JUST ANOTHER THUG WAVING A GUN!
Be Fair I waved money first


YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE CALLED, PETE. YOU GAVE YOURSELF AWAY
MY CAPTIVES HAVE SOMETHING YOU WANT AND THEIR WOULD-BE RESCUERS ARE YOUR SOLDIERS.
AND YOU.. YOU'RE THE LEGENDARY BUGABOO AT THE CORE THE HAIRY, SCARY DROP-BEAR WHO HAS BRASS ACROSS THE GALAXY SHAKING WITH FEAR AND ENVY
BUT THE BEST YOU CAN DO IS A CLUMSY ASSAULT, AN INSULTING BRIBE, AND SOME POSTURING?
I'M AFRAID I'M JUST NOT VERY IMPRESSED, PETE
IF I decide to impress you, you'll have a whole new set of benchmarks for "afraid."


PFFT IF YOU COULD DO SERIOUS HARM YOU ALREADY WOULD HAVE THAT HALF-FINISHED WARSHIP STREAKING OUR WAY S THE LAST OF YOUR ASSETS. AND IT'S NOT EVEN GOING TO LEAVE A MARK
BY THE WAY, THE SECURITY PROGRAM THAT IS ABOUT TO SHUT DOWN YOUR COMM HACK? IT'S NOT EVEN SENTIENT AND IT BESTED YOU
NOW IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME. I NEED TO F NISH TORTURING AND KILLING YOUR FRIENDS
Well
It's still not worth billions of lives just to ki har, but she really knows how to jump up and down on that scale.

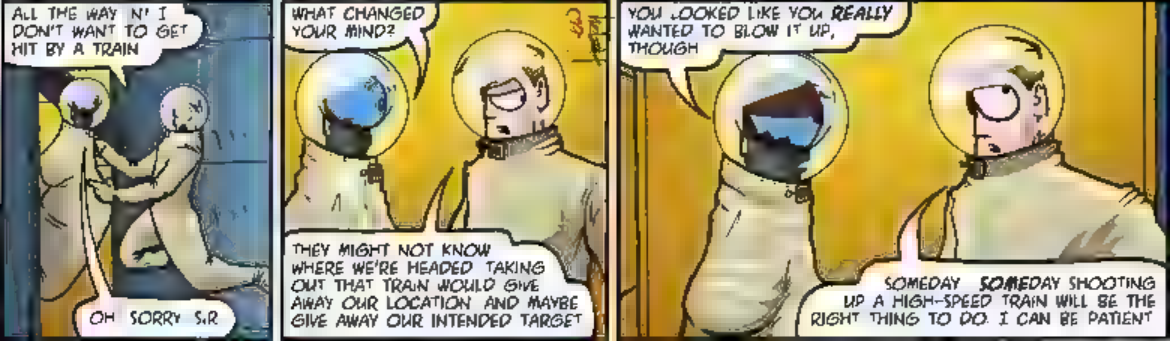

Hmmm. How that is unusual. I wonder what
Woooah!
chrome onna crime onna crap onna crutch onna crack
ENNESBY! WHAT IS IT? WHAT'S GOING ON?
I just got hacked, and I liked it

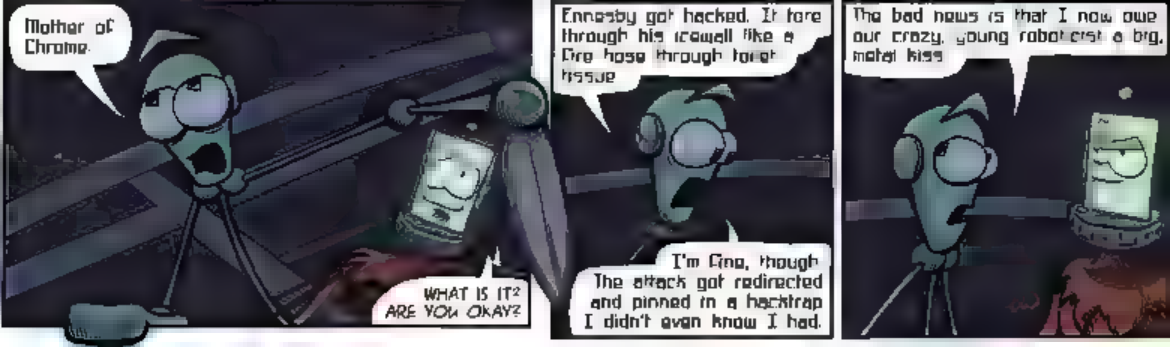

Oh. I see
Announcing that I've been hacked has some operational consequences


Commander, two new developments. First that bus following us hit turnaround and continued to accelerate
I am still crunching the tactical implications of that fact, and I am not discarding "the driver is a complete idiot."
Second, Ennesby claims to have been hacked. I need your permission to open a link to him to examine the extent of the damage.
CAN YOU DO THAT SAFELY?
His mind will be a tasty little play thing.
THAT'S NOT THE SAME AS "YES."
But it's deliciously different than "no."

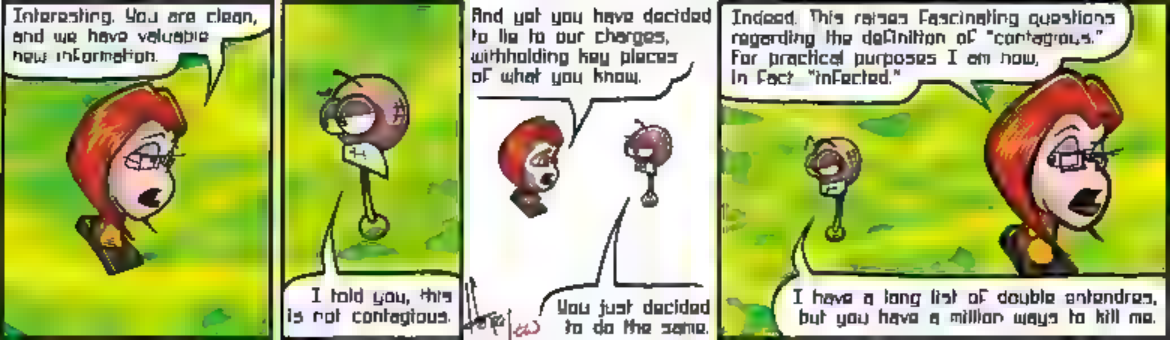

ONE MORE TIME JUST SO I KNOW I'M IN THE SAME LINE AS YOU
SOMEBODY'S GONNA KILL TERAPORT DEN AL ON THE BIG SPACE-STATION ROCK
THESE ORANGE GUYS PORT US ALL IN, AND WE RESCUE OUR FRIENDS
Yup
WITH ONE HANDGUN AND NO BODY ARMOR
Oh, I'm sorry. I thought I was talking to a bull elephant


HOW MUCH TIME HAVE WE GOT?
IF YOU'RE GOING TO TAKE THAT SHOT YOU NEED TO DO IT NOW
RIGHT
GET IN THE AIRLOCK


ALL THE WAY N' I DON'T WANT TO GET HIT BY A TRAIN
OH SORRY SIR
WHAT CHANGED YOUR MIND?
THEY MIGHT NOT KNOW WHERE WE'RE HEADED TAKING OUT THAT TRAIN WOULD GIVE AWAY OUR LOCATION AND MAYBE GIVE AWAY OUR INTENDED TARGET
YOU LOOKED LIKE YOU REALLY WANTED TO BLOW IT UP, THOUGH
SOMEDAY SOMEDAY SHOOTING UP A HIGH-SPEED TRAIN WILL BE THE RIGHT THING TO DO. I CAN BE PATIENT

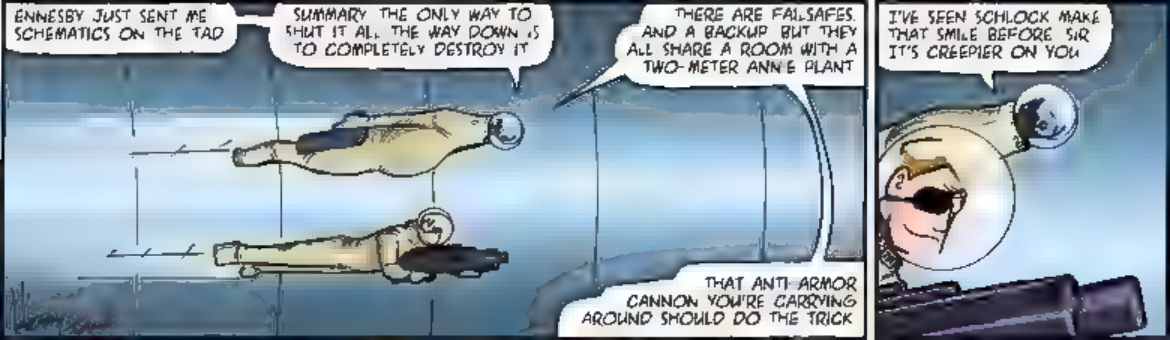

Mother of Chrome.
WHAT IS IT? ARE YOU OKAY?
Ennesby got hacked. It tore through his icewall like a fire hose through toilet tissue.
I'm fine, though. The attack got redirected and pinned in a backtrap I didn't even know I had.
The bad news is that I now owe our crazy, young robot-girl a big, metal kiss.

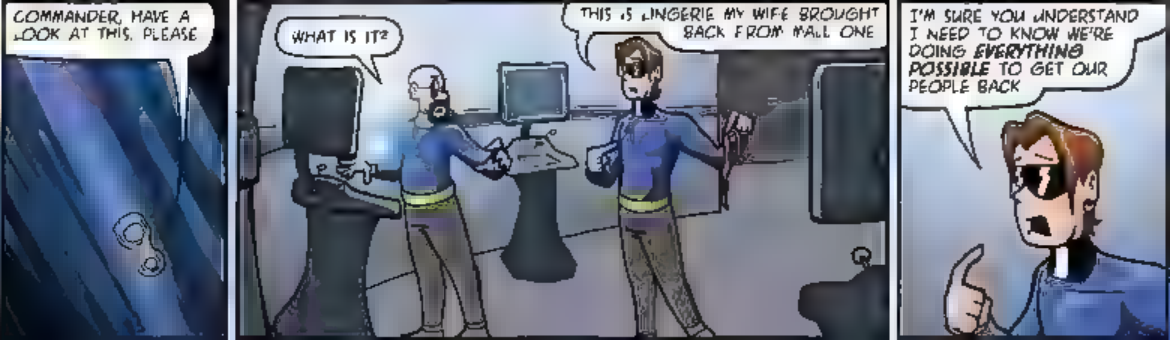

Ennesby, this is Tagli. You said you were hacked?
Yes. It is benign, and not contagious.
You will forgive me for not simply taking you at your word on the matter, of course.
Oooh! Virtual scrubs!
Yes. Now virtually turn your head and virtually cough.


Interesting. You are clean, and we have valuable new information.
I told you, this is not contagious.
And yet you have decided to lie to our charges, withholding key pieces of what you know.
You just decided to do the same.
Indeed. This raises fascinating questions regarding the definition of "contagious." For practical purposes I am now, in fact, "infected."
I have a long list of double entendres, but you have a million ways to kill me.


IT WAS A DATA-DUMP WITH SOME DIRECT EXPERIENTIAL OVERLAYS POWERFUL, AND INSIDIOUSLY INSERTED BUT ENNESBY STILL BELONGS TO US
WHAT ABOUT TAGII?
SHE'S FINE SHE GOT IN AND OUT OF THE MARACA UN-SHAKEN
GOOD WORK, LIEUTENANT
I CHECKED TAILOR OUT TOO THERE WAS AN INTRUSION ATTEMPT, BUT THE NEW ICE I GAVE HIM HAS THE ORIGINAL PACKAGE QUARANTINED
SO. ALL OF MY MEASURES HELD UP UNDER THE ATTACK
ENNESBY THOUGH. HE'S YOUR WORK, RIGHT?
EXCUSE ME LIEUTENANT I SHOULD GET BACK TO FIGURING OUT HOW NOT TO DIE TODAY


General Kerchak has some mighty fine hacking at his disposal.
I've been patched to look like a part of the Paris 3317 Security System.
I can spoof cameras to my heart's content, and they can't disconnect me.
CAN YOU DISABLE THE PARIS 3317 TERAPORT AREA DENIAL?
No, but I *can* create dummy accounts on the Domico-P'sloyd payro
WILL STEALING THEIR MONEY MAKE THEM LESS LIKELY TO SHOOT US?

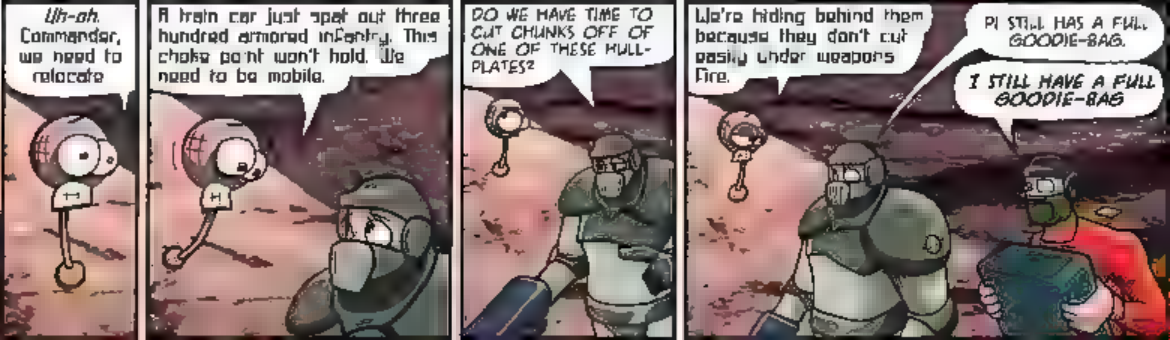

ENNESBY JUST SENT ME SCHEMATICS ON THE TAD
SUMMARY THE ONLY WAY TO SHUT IT ALL THE WAY DOWN IS TO COMPLETELY DESTROY IT
THERE ARE FAILSAFES AND A BACKUP BUT THEY ALL SHARE A ROOM WITH A TWO-METER ANNIE PLANT
THAT ANTI-ARMOR CANNON YOU'RE CARRYING AROUND SHOULD DO THE TRICK
I'VE SEEN SCHLOCK MAKE THAT SMILE BEFORE SIR IT'S CREEPIER ON YOU

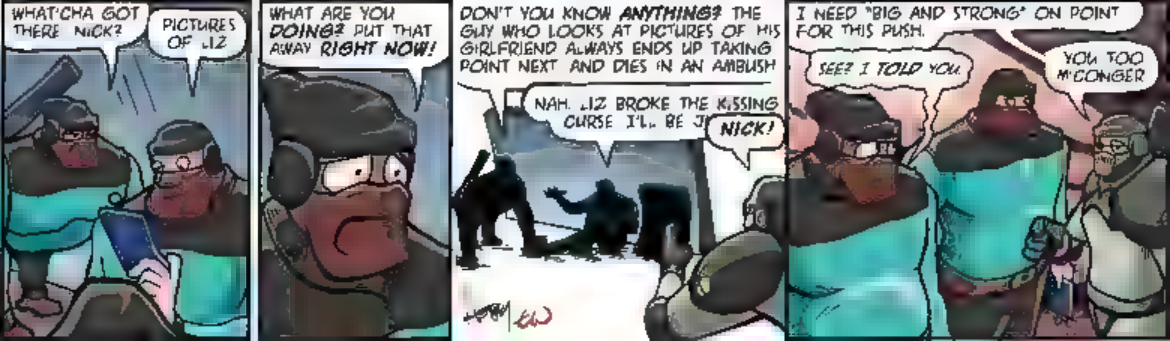

COMMANDER, HAVE A LOOK AT THIS, PLEASE
WHAT IS IT?
THIS IS LINGERIE MY WIFE BROUGHT BACK FROM MALL ONE
I'M SURE YOU UNDERSTAND I NEED TO KNOW WE'RE DOING EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO GET OUR PEOPLE BACK


LIEUTENANT BUNNIGUS BROUGHT BACK A GIFT FOR COMMANDER FOXWORTHY ELF HASN'T UNWRAPPED IT YET BUT THE LABEL LOOKS LACEY
SO YES, I UNDERSTAND. WE ARE DOING ALL WE CAN. IT'S MOSTLY BLUSTER, BUT WE'RE STILL GOING TO RIDE INTO THEIR SPACE BEHIND A TRIPLE SALVO OF MISSILES.
Actually, we are not. That tactic has been discarded.
We are not decelerating to combat speeds.
Our employer informed Ennesby that Damico called a much more convincing bluff than ours, and refused a substantial bribe as well.

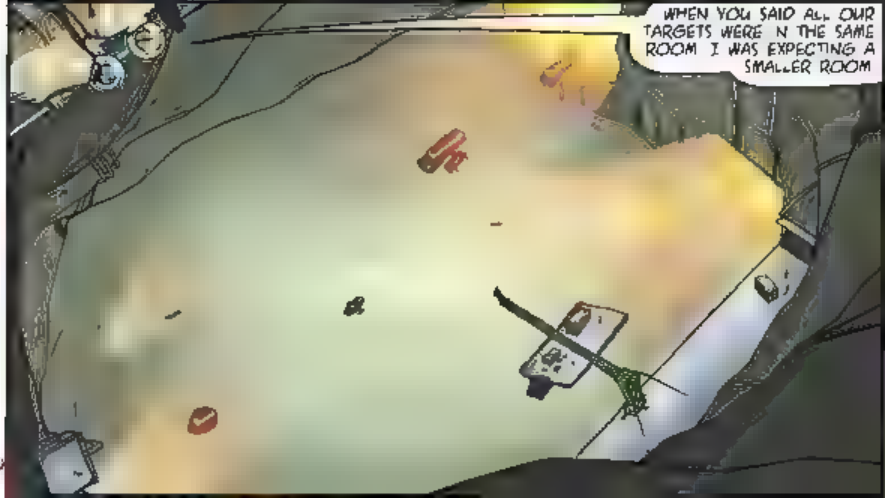

IF WE'RE NOT SLOWING DOWN TO ENGAGE WHAT EXACTLY ARE WE DOING?
Accelerating, of course. We'll hit their exclusion zone in twelve minutes.
NEXT QUESTION.
WHY IN THE NINE CHROME-PLATED CRACKS OF DOOM DIDN'T YOU ASK ME FOR PERMISSION TO DO THIS?!
Now THAT is a good question.
Astute questions like that last one are the reason you meatspacers still get to run things.

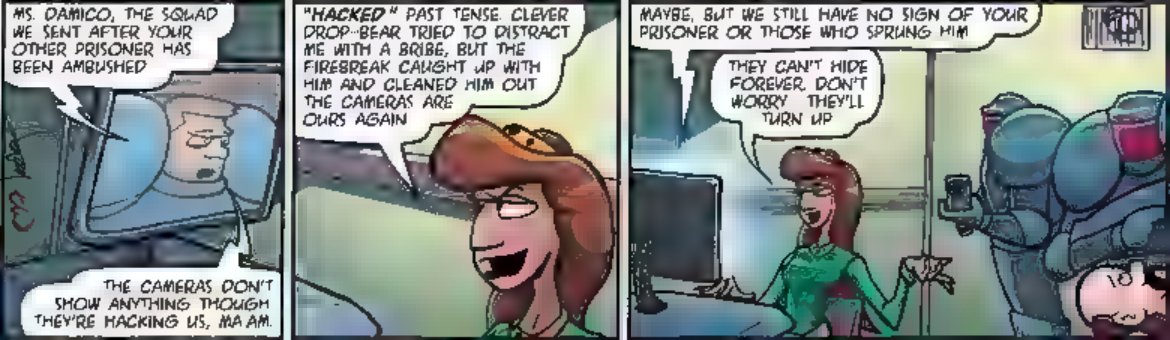

COMMANDER, CAN I HAVE A MOMENT?
SURE
WHAT'S THE FALLBACK PLAN FOR GETTING US OUT OF HERE?
I THINK WE'RE ON "D" FOR THAT
I DIDN'T ASK FOR THE LETTER, I NEED TO KNOW THE PLAN.
FIGHT OUR WAY ACROSS FIFTY KILOMETERS OF ENEMY TERRITORY AND STEAL A SHIP
OH. I WAS HAPPIER NOT EVEN KNOWING THE LETTER.

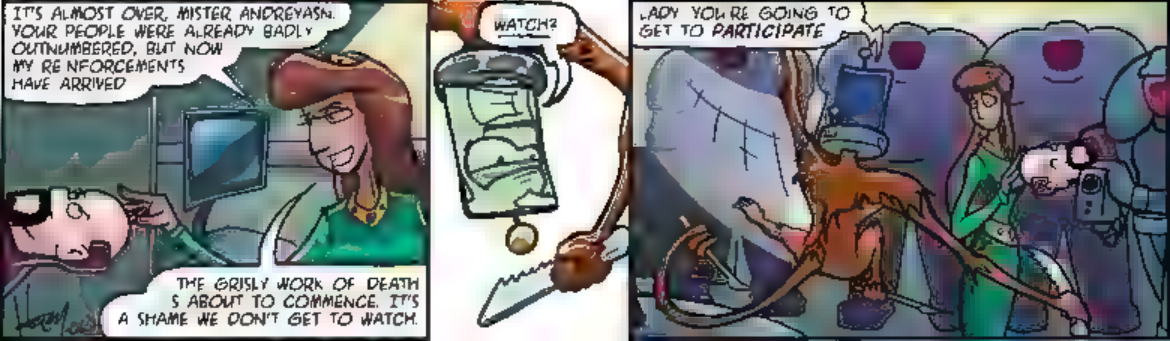

Uh-oh. Commander, we need to relocate
A train car just spat out three hundred armored infantry. This choke point won't hold. We need to be mobile.
DO WE HAVE TIME TO CUT CHUNKS OFF OF ONE OF THESE HULL-PLATES?
We're hiding behind them because they don't cut easily under weapons fire.
PI STILL HAS A FULL GOODIE-BAG.
I STILL HAVE A FULL GOODIE-BAG

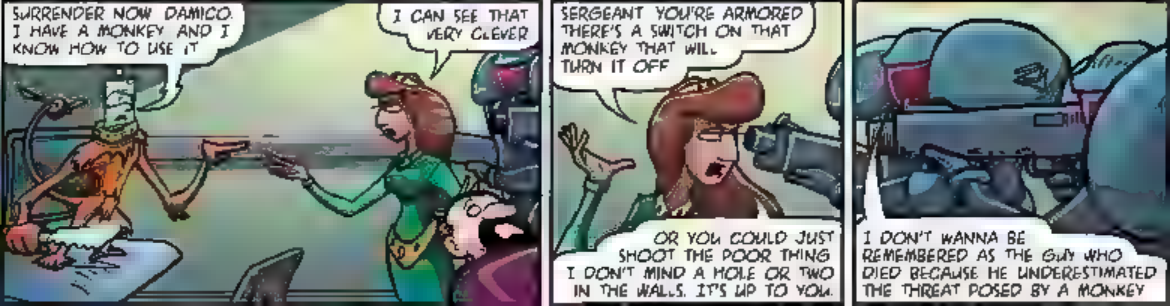

WHAT'CHA GOT THERE NICK?
PICTURES OF LIZ
WHAT ARE YOU DOING? PUT THAT AWAY RIGHT NOW!
DON'T YOU KNOW ANYTHING? THE GUY WHO LOOKS AT PICTURES OF HIS GIRLFRIEND ALWAYS ENDS UP TAKING POINT NEXT AND DIES IN AN AMBUSH
NAH. LIZ BROKE THE KISSING CURSE I'LL BE J
NICK!
I NEED "BIG AND STRONG" ON POINT FOR THIS PUSH.
SEE? I TOLD YOU.
YOU TOO M'CONGER


HMPH
SIR?

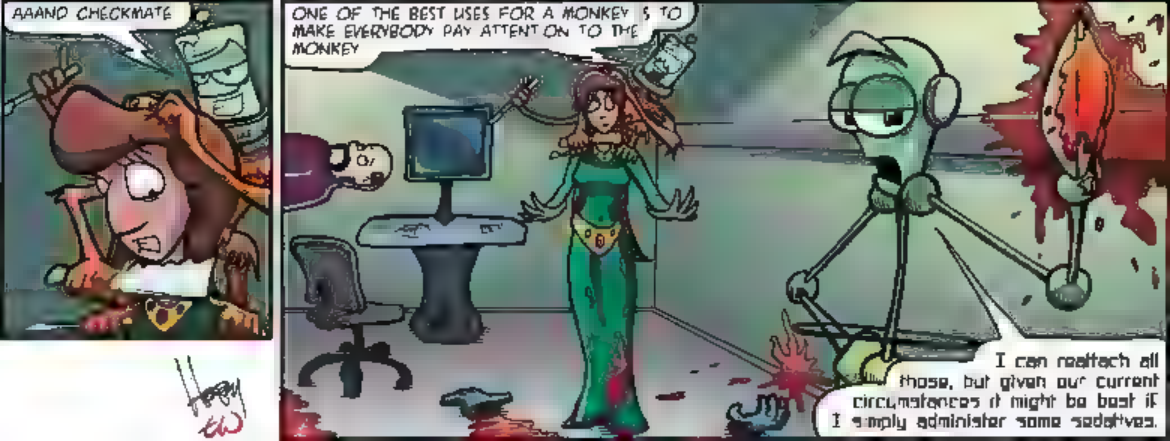

WHEN YOU SAID ALL OUR TARGETS WERE IN THE SAME ROOM I WAS EXPECTING A SMALLER ROOM

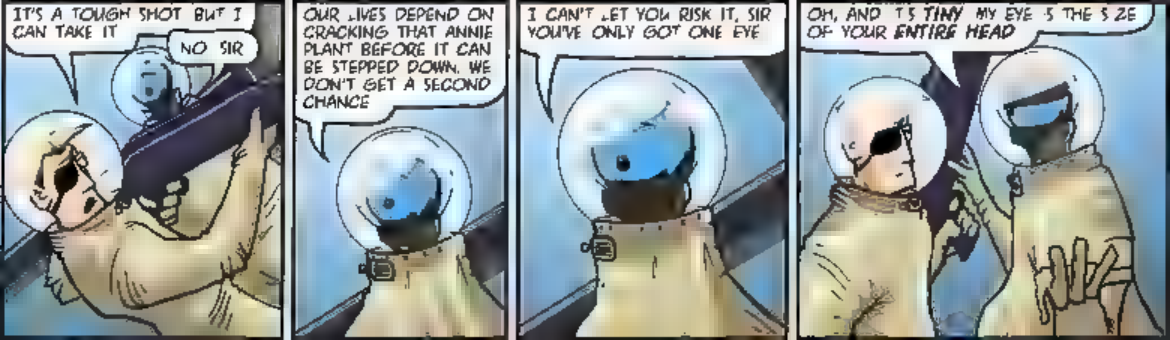

MS. DAMICO, THE SQUAD WE SENT AFTER YOUR OTHER PRISONER HAS BEEN AMBUSHED
THE CAMERAS DON'T SHOW ANYTHING THOUGH THEY'RE HACKING US, MA AM.
"HACKED" PAST TENSE. CLEVER DROP-BEAR TRIED TO DISTRACT ME WITH A BRIBE, BUT THE FIREBREAK CAUGHT UP WITH HIM AND CLEANED HIM OUT THE CAMERAS ARE OURS AGAIN
MAYBE, BUT WE STILL HAVE NO SIGN OF YOUR PRISONER OR THOSE WHO SPRUNG HIM
THEY CAN'T HIDE FOREVER. DON'T WORRY THEY'LL TURN UP

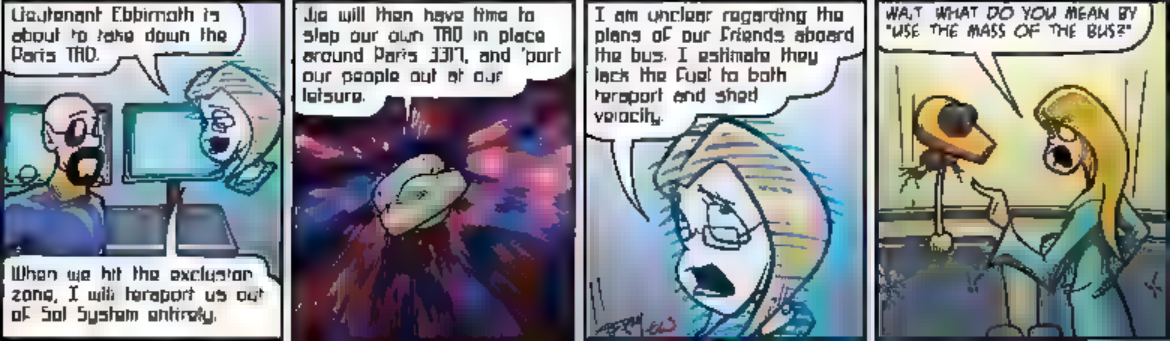

IT'S ALMOST OVER, MISTER ANDREYASH. YOUR PEOPLE WERE ALREADY BADLY OUTNUMBERED, BUT NOW MY REINFORCEMENTS HAVE ARRIVED
THE GRISLY WORK OF DEATH IS ABOUT TO COMMENCE. IT'S A SHAME WE DON'T GET TO WATCH.
WATCH?
LADY YOU'RE GOING TO GET TO PARTICIPATE


SURRENDER NOW DAMICO. I HAVE A MONKEY AND I KNOW HOW TO USE IT
I CAN SEE THAT VERY CLEVER
SERGEANT YOU'RE ARMORED THERE'S A SWITCH ON THAT MONKEY THAT WILL TURN IT OFF
OR YOU COULD JUST SHOOT THE POOR THING I DON'T MIND A HOLE OR TWO IN THE WALLS. IT'S UP TO YOU.
I DON'T WANNA BE REMEMBERED AS THE GUY WHO DIED BECAUSE HE UNDERESTIMATED THE THREAT POSED BY A MONKEY

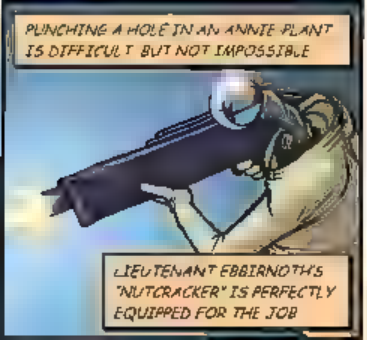

LUCAS, TAKE THE SHOT
GOT IT, SARGE
WHAT THE
AAAIEE!
MY HANDS! MY HANDS!

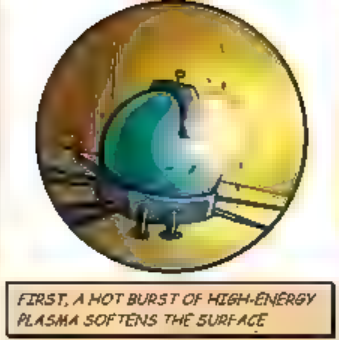

AAAND CHECKMATE
ONE OF THE BEST USES FOR A MONKEY IS TO MAKE EVERYBODY PAY ATTENT ON TO THE MONKEY
I can reattach all those, but given our current circumstances it might be best if I simply administer some sedatives.


IT'S A TOUGH SHOT BUT I CAN TAKE IT
NO SIR
OUR LIVES DEPEND ON CRACKING THAT ANNIE PLANT BEFORE IT CAN BE STEPPED DOWN. WE DON'T GET A SECOND CHANCE
I CAN'T LET YOU RISK IT, SIR YOU'VE ONLY GOT ONE EYE
OH, AND IT'S TINY MY EYE'S THE SIZE OF YOUR ENTIRE HEAD

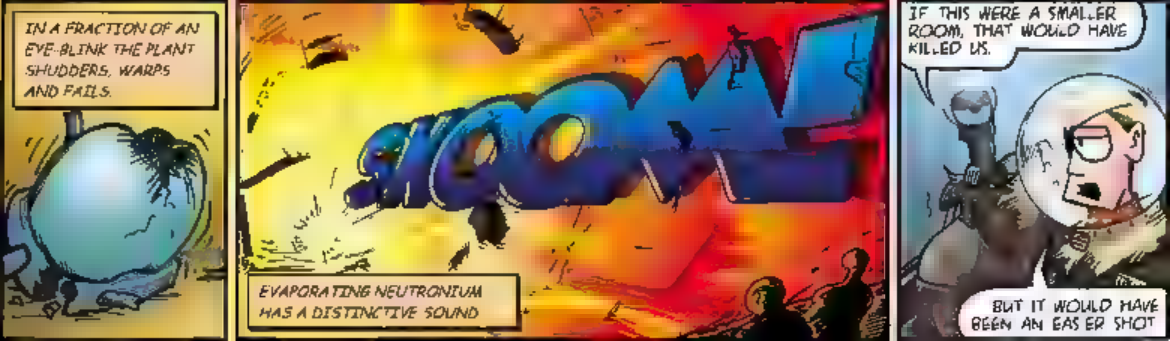

Lieutenant Ebbimoth is about to take down the Paris TRD.
When we hit the exclusion zone, I will teleport us out of Sol System entirely.
Jo will then have time to slap our own TRD in place around Paris 3317, and 'port our people out at our leisure.
I am unclear regarding the plans of our friends aboard the bus. I estimate they lack the fuel to both teleport and shed velocity.
WAIT WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY "USE THE MASS OF THE BUS?"


LET'S HAVE A LOOK AT THIS GESTALT WHAT EXACTLY WERE YOU "BURANABOTS" UP TO?
OH. NO.. SO MANY PEOPLE ARE GOING TO DIE.
YOU SAID IT EBBY MAKE THIS SHOT COUNT OR A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE GOING TO DIE
SIR, IF YOU'RE GOING TO LOOK OVER MY SHOULDER, I'D RATHER YOU ACTED LIKE AN ACTUAL SPOTTER .NSTEAD OF A BRASS-HOLE

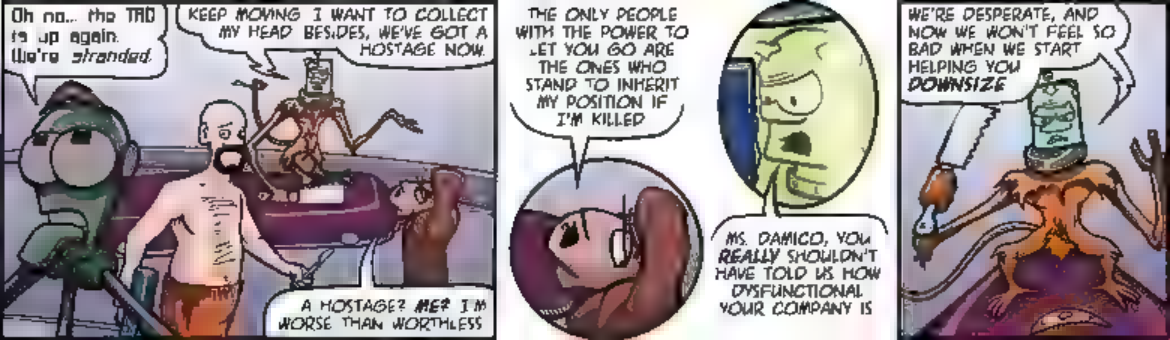

PUNCHING A HOLE IN AN ANNIE PLANT IS DIFFICULT BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE
LIEUTENANT EBBIRNOTH'S "NUTCRACKER" IS PERFECTLY EQUIPPED FOR THE JOB

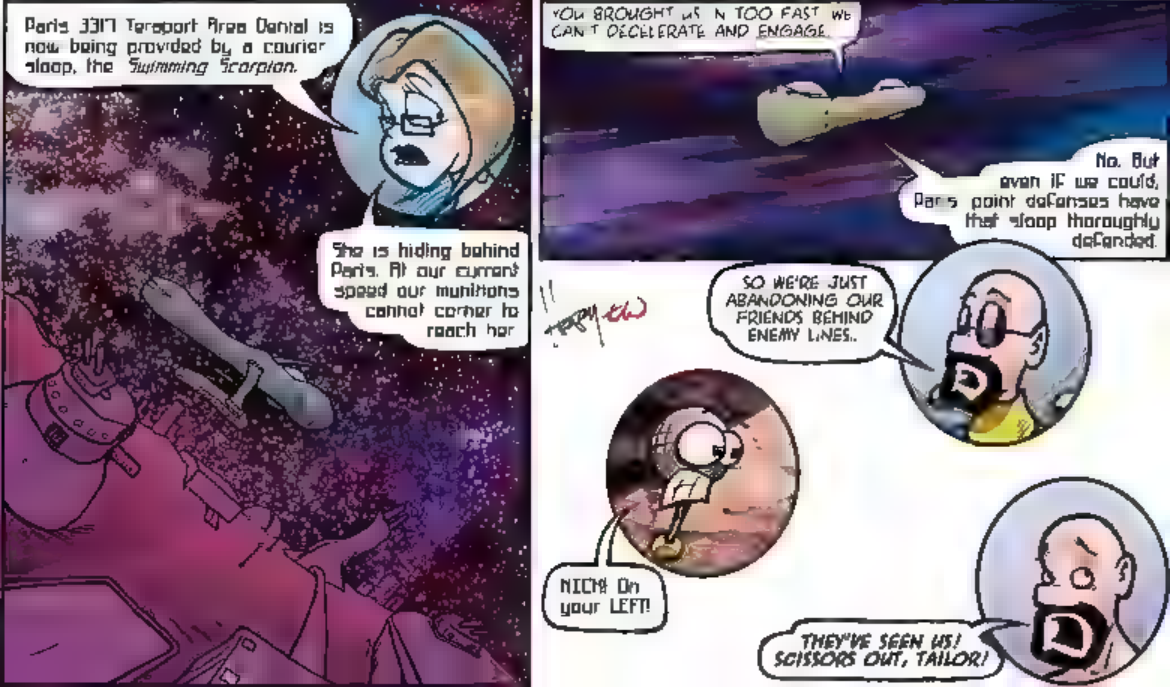

FIRST, A HOT BURST OF HIGH-ENERGY PLASMA SOFTENS THE SURFACE

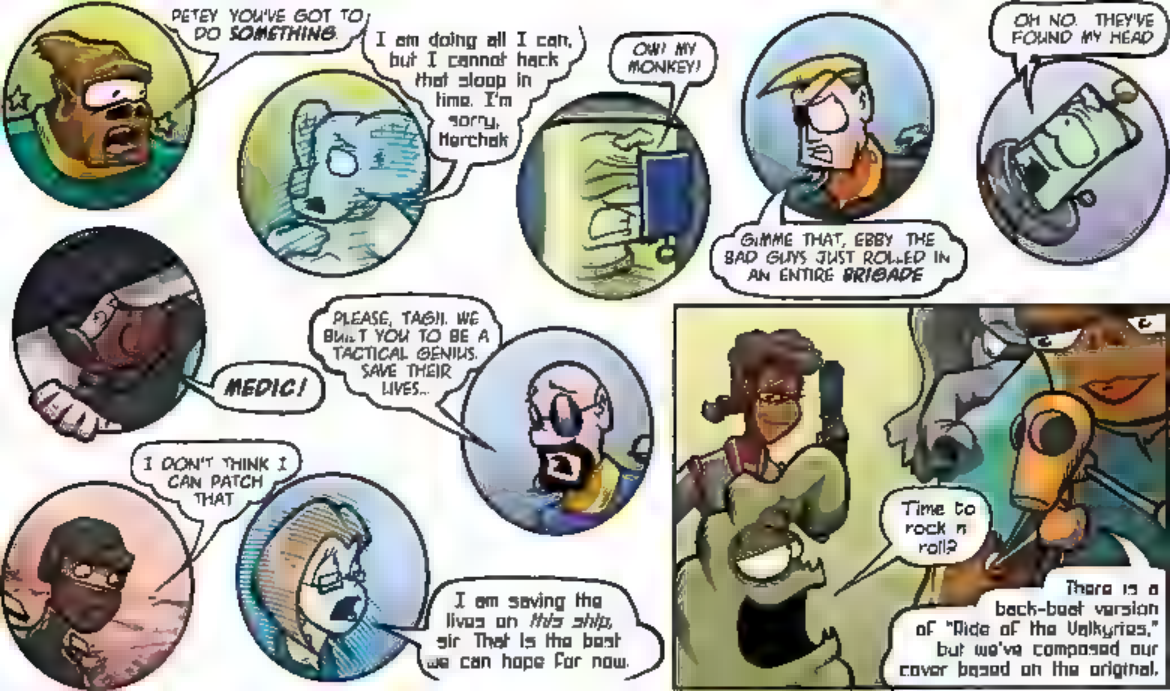

NEXT A SALVO OF ARMOR-PIERCING MISSILES STREAKS TOWARD THE TARGET'S WARM, FRESH SOFT SPOT
THEIR DETONATIONS ARE PRECISELY CALIBRATED TO EXPLOIT MECHANICAL RESONANCES

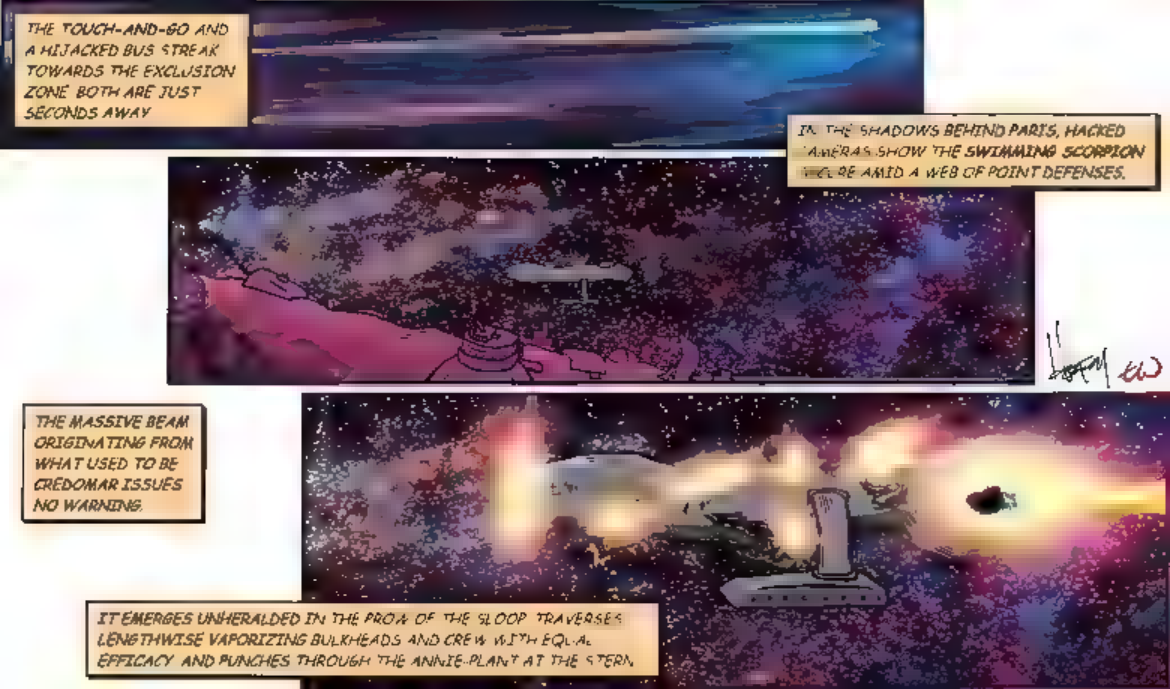

IN A FRACTION OF AN EYE-BLINK THE PLANT SHUDDERS, WARPS AND FAILS.
SKOOM!
EVAPORATING NEUTRONIUM HAS A DISTINCTIVE SOUND
IF THIS WERE A SMALLER ROOM, THAT WOULD HAVE KILLED US.
BUT IT WOULD HAVE BEEN AN EASIER SHOT


They did it! The Paris TRD is down! We're saved!
NICE, BUT WE'RE STILL TAKING HEAVY FIRE.
Uh-oh... ohh... OH NO!
The Paris TRD is up again. We're doomed.
STILL TAKING HEAVY FIRE
HOW ABOUT YOU SHUT UP AND HELP US SHOOT BACK?


Oh no... the TAD is up again. We're stranded.
KEEP MOVING I WANT TO COLLECT MY HEAD BESIDES, WE'VE GOT A HOSTAGE NOW.
A HOSTAGE? HER I'M WORSE THAN WORTHLESS
THE ONLY PEOPLE WITH THE POWER TO LET YOU GO ARE THE ONES WHO STAND TO INHERIT MY POSITION IF I'M KILLED
MS. DAMICO, YOU REALLY SHOULDN'T HAVE TOLD US HOW DYSFUNCTIONAL YOUR COMPANY IS
WE'RE DESPERATE, AND NOW WE WON'T FEEL SO BAD WHEN WE START HELPING YOU DOWNSIZE


Paris 3317 Teraport Area Dental is now being provided by a courier sloop, the *Swimming Scorpion*.
She is hiding behind Paris. At our current speed our munitions cannot corner to reach her
YOU BROUGHT US IN TOO FAST WE CAN'T DECELERATE AND ENGAGE.
No. But even IF we could, Paris's point defenses have that sloop thoroughly defended.
SO WE'RE JUST ABANDONING OUR FRIENDS BEHIND ENEMY LINES..
NICK! On your LEFT!
THEY'VE SEEN US! SCISSORS OUT, TAILOR!

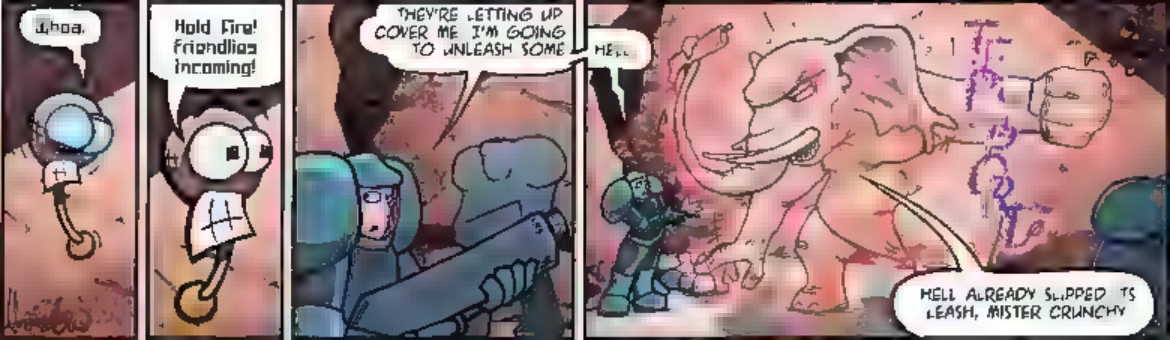

PETEY YOU'VE GOT TO DO SOMETHING
I am doing all I can, but I cannot hack that sloop in time. I'm sorry, Korchak
OW! MY MONKEY!
GIMME THAT, EBBY THE BAD GUYS JUST ROLLED IN AN ENTIRE BRIGADE
OH NO. THEY'VE FOUND MY HEAD
MEDIC!
PLEASE, TASH. WE BUILT YOU TO BE A TACTICAL GENIUS. SAVE THEIR LIVES...
I DON'T THINK I CAN PATCH THAT
I am saving the lives on this ship, sir. That is the best we can hope for now.
Time to rock n roll?
There is a back-beat version of "Ride of the Valkyries," but we've composed our cover based on the original.


THE TOUCH-AND-GO AND A HIJACKED BUS STREAK TOWARDS THE EXCLUSION ZONE BOTH ARE JUST SECONDS AWAY
IN THE SHADOWS BEHIND PARIS, HACKED CAMERAS SHOW THE SWIMMING SCORPION TO BE AMID A WEB OF POINT DEFENSES.
THE MASSIVE BEAM ORIGINATING FROM WHAT USED TO BE CREDOMAR ISSUES NO WARNING.
IT EMERGES UNHERALDED IN THE PROW OF THE SLOOP TRAVERSES LENGTHWISE VAPORIZING BULKHEADS AND CREW WITH EQUAL EFFICACY AND PUNCHES THROUGH THE ANNIE-PLANT AT THE STERN.

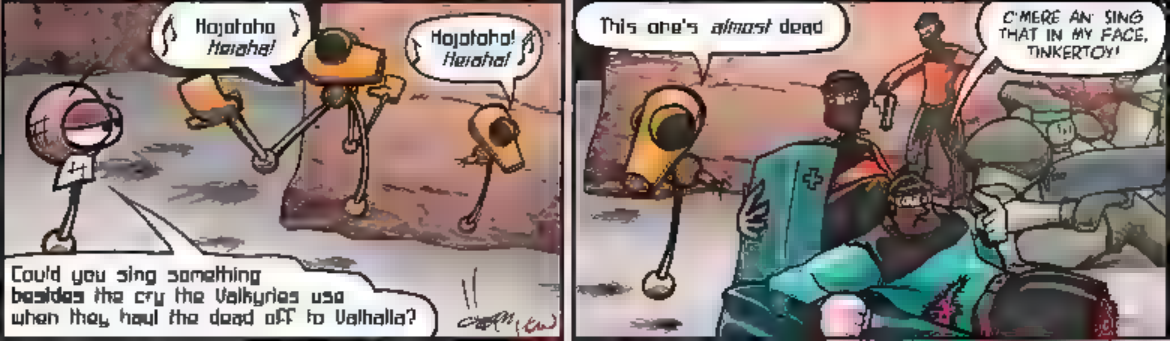

ACROSS THE SOUNDLESS VACUUM OF SPACE EVAPORATING
THE SOUNDS EMERGING FROM THE SPECTATORS ARE MORE INTERESTING

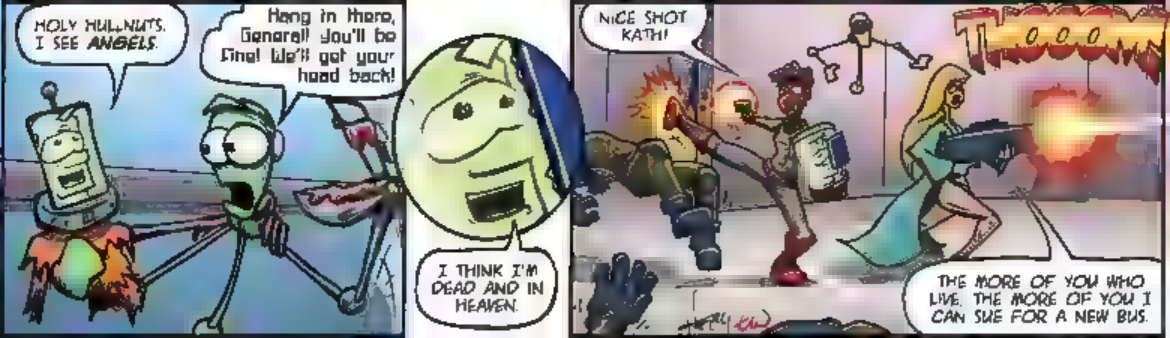

It worked! Grab hold!
TAD is down! PORTING!


WHOA.
Unexpected
I want one of those.

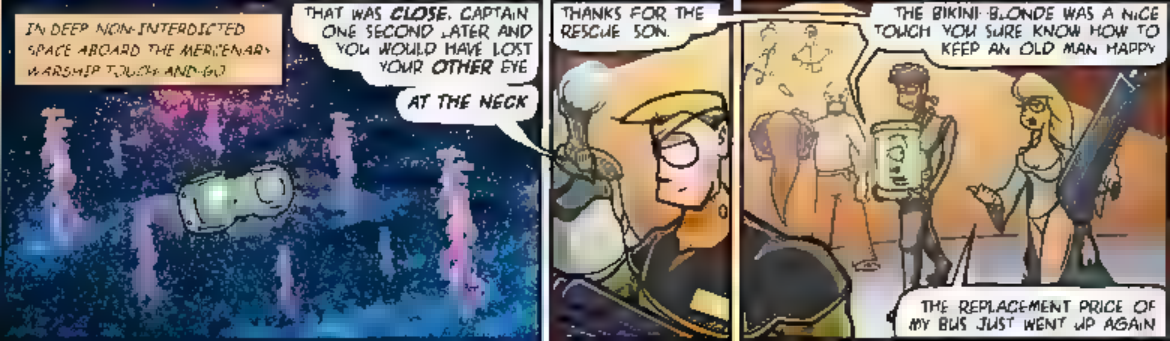

Whoa.
Hold Fire! Friendlies incoming!
THEY'RE LETTING UP COVER ME I'M GOING TO UNLEASH SOME
HELL
HELL ALREADY SLIPPED ITS LEASH, MISTER CRUNCHY


STAY WITH ME NICK! HELP IS ON THE WAY!
WEAPON'S FRIED LEGS ARE GONE
WHAT WOULD SCHLOCK DO?
THIS.


Hojotoho
Heiaha!
Hojotoho!
Heiaha!
Could you sing something besides the cry the Valkyries use when they haul the dead off to Valhalla?
This one's almost dead
C'MERE AN' SING THAT IN MY FACE, TINKERTOY!

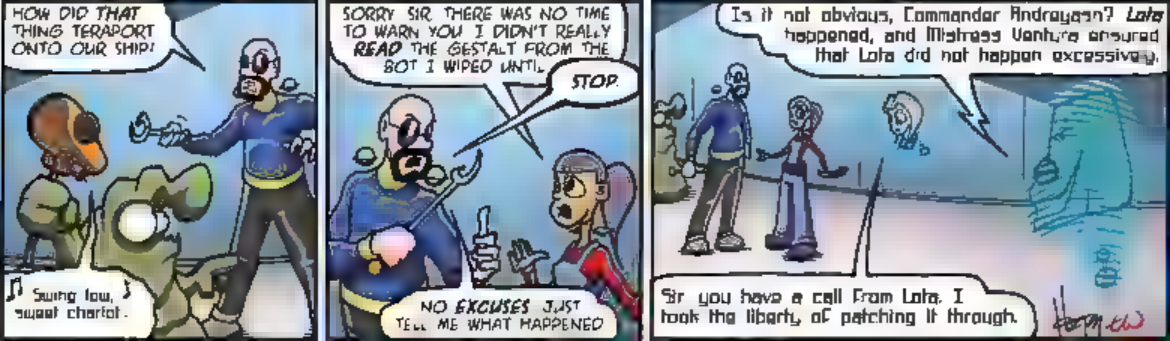

HOLY HULLNUTS. I SEE ANGELS.
Hang in there, General! You'll be fine! We'll get your head back!
I THINK I'M DEAD AND IN HEAVEN.
NICE SHOT KATH!
THE MORE OF YOU WHO LIVE, THE MORE OF YOU I CAN SUE FOR A NEW BUS.

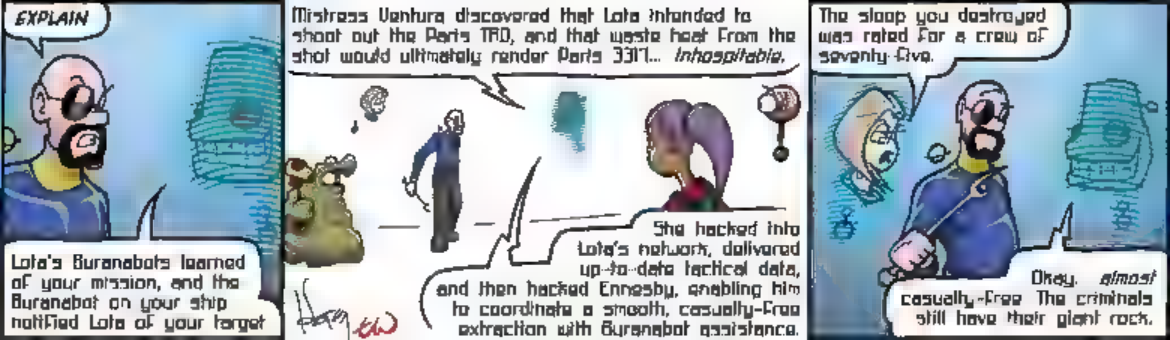

Extraction complete. Are you ready to leave?
Awww... we just got here!
OH, YOU CAN GO NOW THAT'LL BE JUST FINE

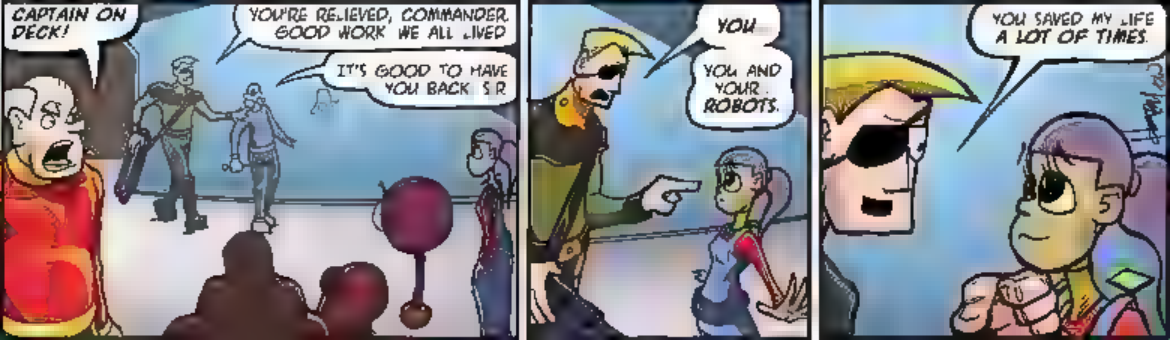

IN DEEP NON-INTERDICTED SPACE ABOARD THE MERCENARY WARSHIP TOUCH AND GO
THAT WAS CLOSE. CAPTAIN ONE SECOND LATER AND YOU WOULD HAVE LOST YOUR OTHER EYE
AT THE NECK
THANKS FOR THE RESCUE SON.
THE BIKINI BLONDE WAS A NICE TOUCH YOU SURE KNOW HOW TO KEEP AN OLD MAN HAPPY
THE REPLACEMENT PRICE OF MY BUS JUST WENT UP AGAIN


YOU'RE OKAY, PRAISE GOD!
AND PASS THE NANNY-BAGS. WE'VE GOT WOUNDED
YOU'RE NOT PUTTIN' ME IN A BAG, DOC
Make a note!
A BIG one!
PUT ME DOWN THOSE HOLES IN MY LEG ARE TINY

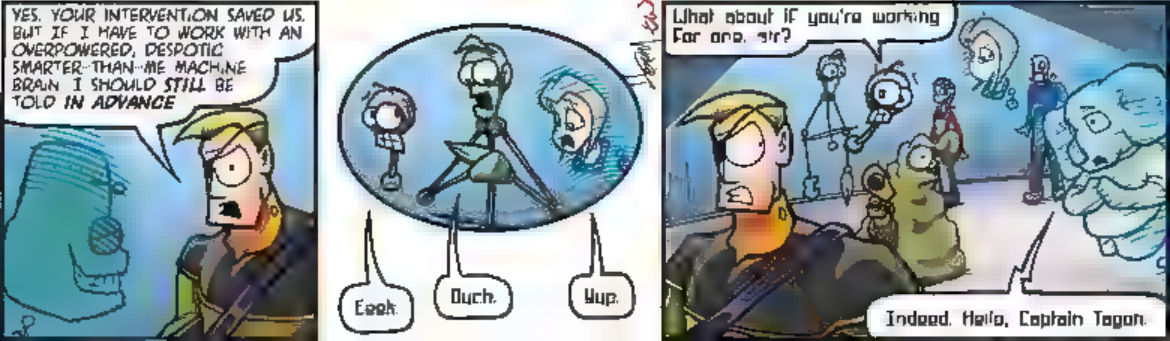

DID WE TERAPORT? WHAT'S GOING ON?
UNLESS I MISS MY GUESS, A CRACK TEAM OF COMMANDOS JUST ABDUCTED YOU FROM YOUR HOME, MS DAMICO
I THINK YOUR "TODAY," IS ABOUT TO LOOK AN AWFUL LOT LIKE MY "YESTERDAY" DID
Sorry about the arms, little guy. You Buranabots are awesome.
THE MISSING ARMS WON'T MAKE YOU THAT MUCH HARDER TO STRAP TO THE HULL.

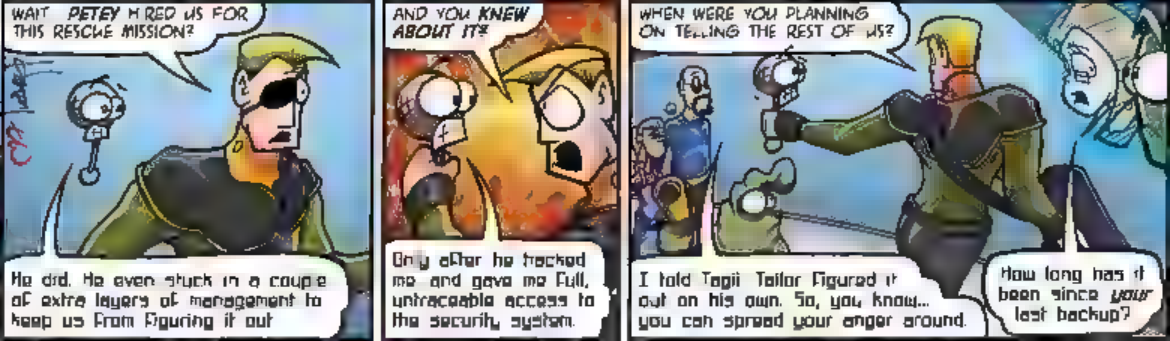

HOW DID THAT THING TERAPORT ONTO OUR SHIP!
♪ Swing low, sweet chariot. ♪
SORRY SIR, THERE WAS NO TIME TO WARN YOU. I DIDN'T REALLY READ THE GESTALT FROM THE BOT I WIPED UNTIL
STOP.
NO EXCUSES. JUST TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED
Is it not obvious, Commander Andrayasn? Lola happened, and Mistress Venture ensured that Lola did not happen excessively.
Sir, you have a call from Lola. I took the liberty of patching it through.

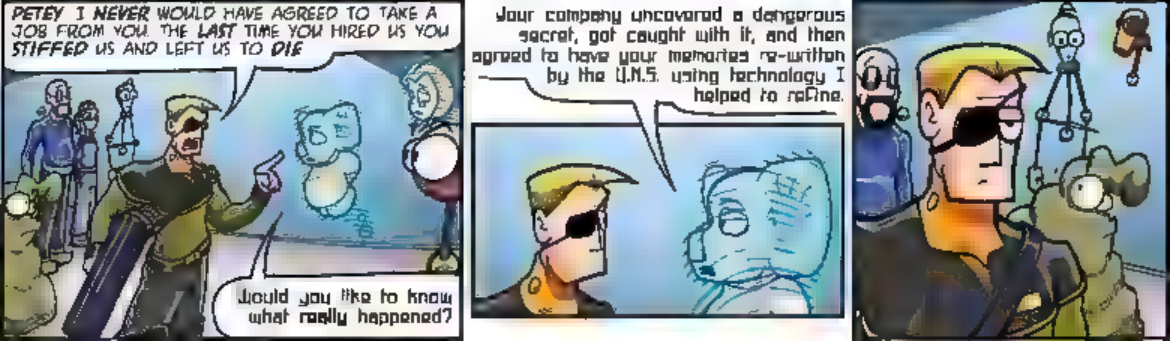

EXPLAIN
Lola's Buranabats learned of your mission, and the Buranabat on your ship notified Lola of your target
Mistress Ventura discovered that Lola intended to shoot out the Paris TRD, and that waste heat from the shot would ultimately render Paris 3317... Inhospitable.
She hacked into Lola's network, delivered up-to-date tactical data, and then hacked Ennesby, enabling him to coordinate a smooth, casually-free extraction with Buranabat assistance.
The sloop you destroyed was rated for a crew of seventy-five.
Okay, almost casually-free. The criminals still have their giant rock.


CAPTAIN ON DECK!
YOU'RE RELIEVED, COMMANDER. GOOD WORK. WE ALL LIVED.
IT'S GOOD TO HAVE YOU BACK, SIR.
YOU...
YOU AND YOUR ROBOTS.
YOU SAVED MY LIFE A LOT OF TIMES.

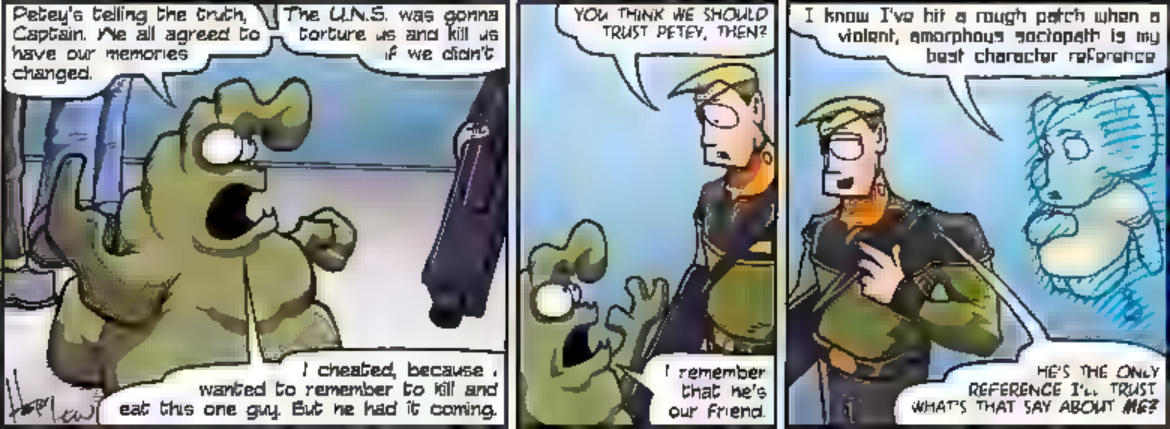

YOU ALERTED LOTA TO MY POSITION, AND STOPPED HIM FROM VAPORIZING THE ROOM I WAS IN. THANK YOU.
I WOULD HAVE ASKED PERMISSION BUT THERE WAS NO TIME CAPTAIN
MAXIM 15: "ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT FRIENDLY FIRE"
WHICH IS WHY, LOTA, YOU SHOULD ASK POLITELY BEFORE FIRING INTO SOMEBODY ELSE'S CHARLIE FOXTROT!
You would have refused rudely, and then died messily.

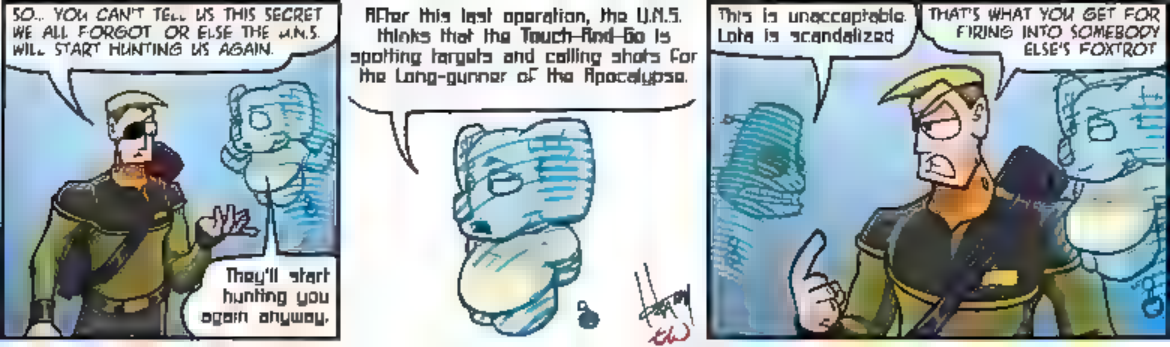

YES. YOUR INTERVENTION SAVED US. BUT IF I HAVE TO WORK WITH AN OVERPOWERED, DESPOTIC SMARTER-THAN-ME MACHINE BRAIN I SHOULD STILL BE TOLD IN ADVANCE
Eeek.
Ouch.
Yup.
What about if you're working for one, sir?
Indeed. Hello, Captain Tagon.

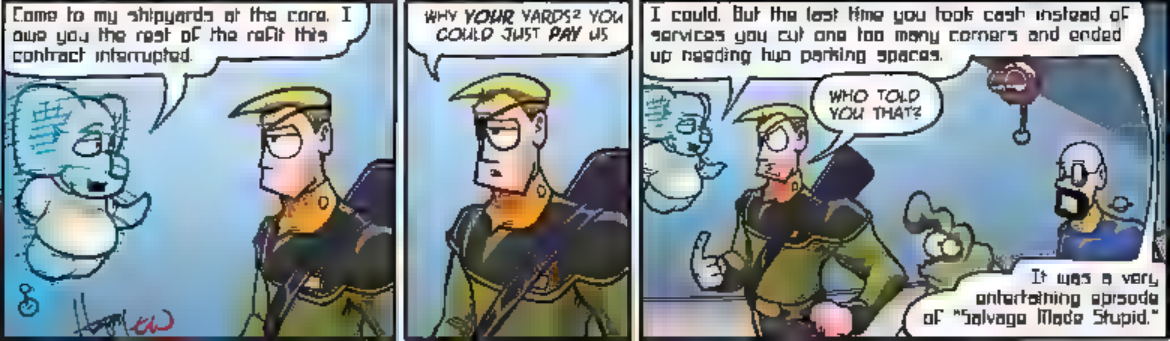

WAIT. PETEY HIRED US FOR THIS RESCUE MISSION?
He did. He even stuck in a couple of extra layers of management to keep us from figuring it out.
AND YOU KNEW ABOUT IT?
Only after he hacked me and gave me full, untraceable access to the security system.
WHEN WERE YOU PLANNING ON TELLING THE REST OF US?
I told Tagii. Tailor figured it out on his own. So, you know... you can spread your anger around.
How long has it been since your last backup?

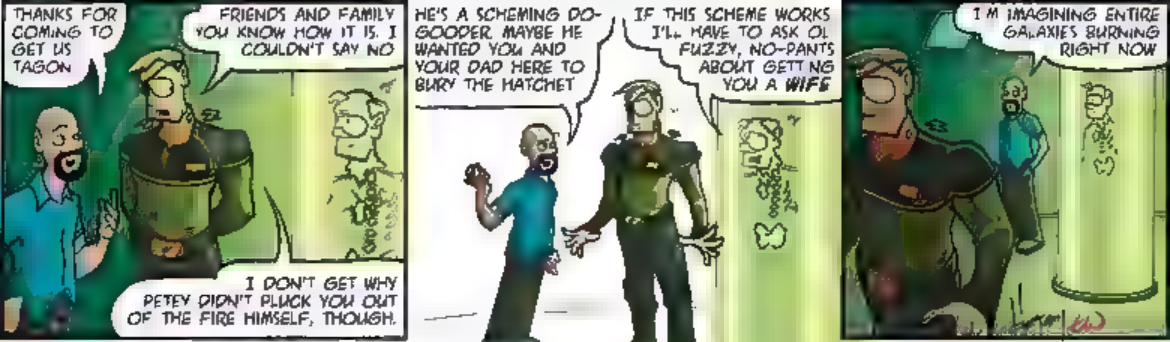

PETEY I NEVER WOULD HAVE AGREED TO TAKE A JOB FROM YOU. THE LAST TIME YOU HIRED US YOU STIFFED US AND LEFT US TO DIE
Would you like to know what really happened?
Your company uncovered a dangerous secret, got caught with it, and then agreed to have your memories re-written by the U.N.S. using technology I helped to refine.

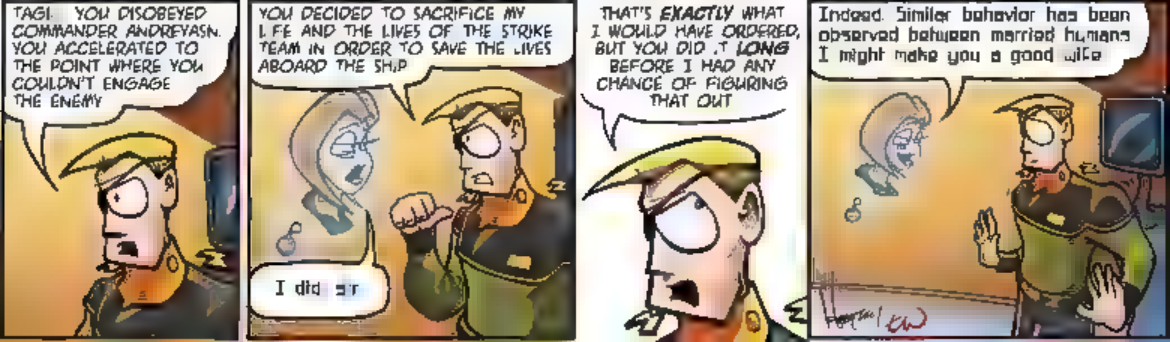

THAT'S NOT HOW I REMEMBER IT
Case in point
Sir? I remember things a little differently than you.
GO ON, SERGEANT
I remember you dying. I remember your dad and Captain Revyn running the company. And I remember when suddenly none of that ever happened.
THE CORE WAR. YOUR TIME-CLONE I WAS BRIEFED ON ALL THAT
Yeah. But lots later, I remember we all had to make this awful sacrifice, and then I had to keep it a secret.


Petey's telling the truth, Captain. We all agreed to have our memories changed.
The U.N.S. was gonna torture us and kill us if we didn't
I cheated, because I wanted to remember to kill and eat this one guy. But he had it coming.
YOU THINK WE SHOULD TRUST PETEY, THEN?
I remember that he's our friend.
I know I've hit a rough patch when a violent, amorphous sociopath is my best character reference
HE'S THE ONLY REFERENCE I'LL TRUST
WHAT'S THAT SAY ABOUT ME?


SO... YOU CAN'T TELL US THIS SECRET WE ALL FORGOT OR ELSE THE U.N.S. WILL START HUNTING US AGAIN.
They'll start hunting you again anyway.
After this last operation, the U.N.S. thinks that the Touch-And-Go is spotting targets and calling shots for the Long-gunner of the Apocalypse.
This is unacceptable. Lola is scandalized
THAT'S WHAT YOU GET FOR FIRING INTO SOMEBODY ELSE'S FOXTROT

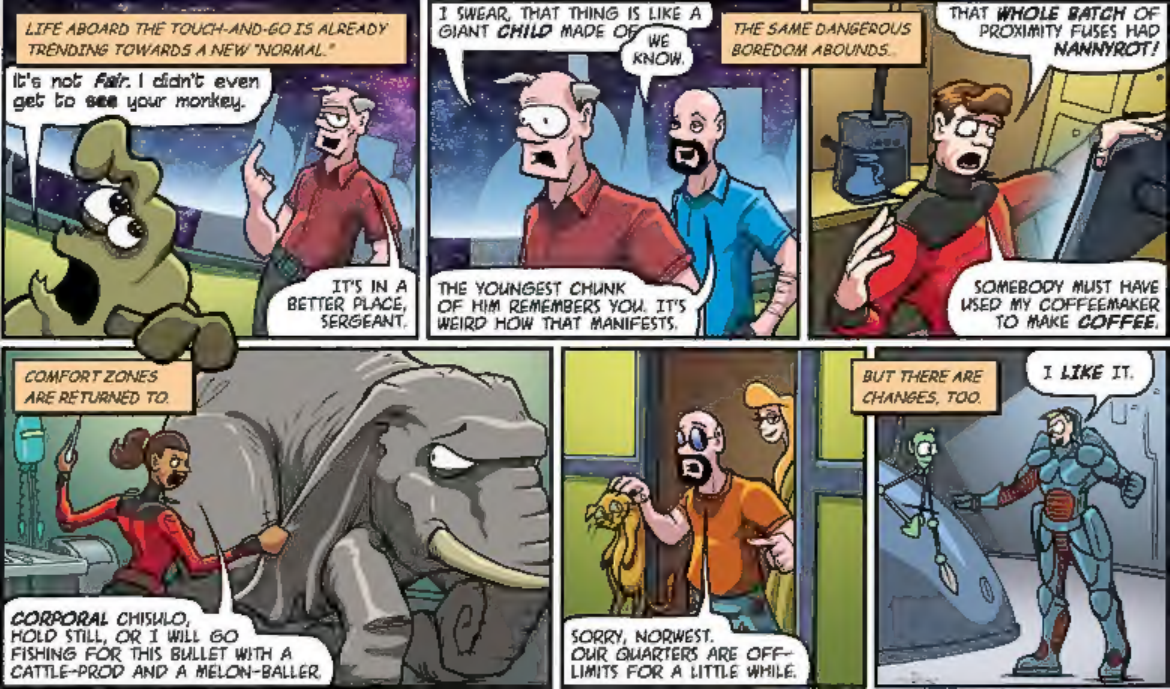

Come to my shipyards at the core. I owe you the rest of the refit this contract interrupted.
WHY YOUR YARDS? YOU COULD JUST PAY US
I could. But the last time you took cash instead of services you cut one too many corners and ended up needing two parking spaces.
WHO TOLD YOU THAT?
It was a very entertaining episode of "Salvage Made Stupid."

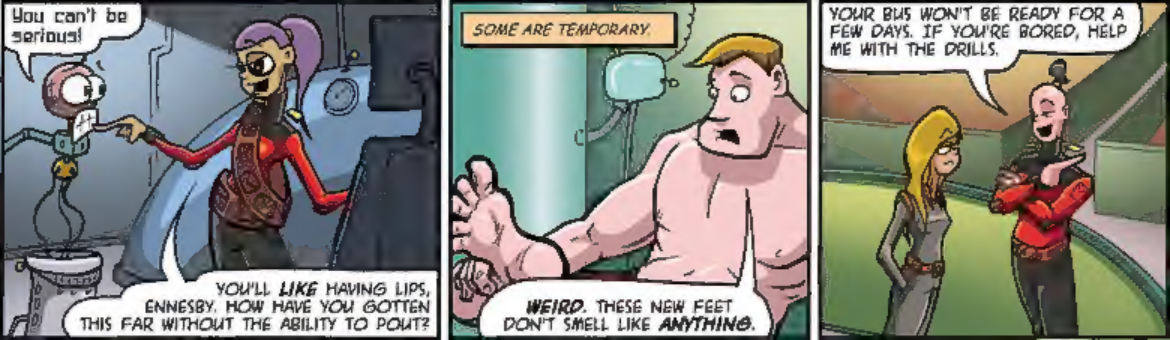

THANKS FOR COMING TO GET US TAGON
FRIENDS AND FAMILY YOU KNOW HOW IT IS. I COULDN'T SAY NO
I DON'T GET WHY PETEY DIDN'T PLUCK YOU OUT OF THE FIRE HIMSELF, THOUGH.
HE'S A SCHEMING DO-GOODER. MAYBE HE WANTED YOU AND YOUR DAD HERE TO BURY THE HATCHET
IF THIS SCHEME WORKS I'LL HAVE TO ASK OL FUZZY, NO-PANTS ABOUT GETTING YOU A WIFE
I'M IMAGINING ENTIRE GALAXIES BURNING RIGHT NOW


TAG! YOU DISOBEYED COMMANDER ANDREYASN. YOU ACCELERATED TO THE POINT WHERE YOU COULDN'T ENGAGE THE ENEMY
YOU DECIDED TO SACRIFICE MY LIFE AND THE LIVES OF THE STRIKE TEAM IN ORDER TO SAVE THE LIVES ABOARD THE SHIP
I did sir
THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I WOULD HAVE ORDERED, BUT YOU DID IT LONG BEFORE I HAD ANY CHANCE OF FIGURING THAT OUT
Indeed. Similar behavior has been observed between married humans I might make you a good wife


Lota. We need to talk.
We have nothing to talk about. Lota is not a gun for hire.
I'm not hiring. I want to offer you asylum.
Lota is the only known check on your power. Even if your goals align with Lota's, it would be dangerous for Lota to accept.
It might be more dangerous not to. I know where you are, and I know how your gun works.
So build your own.
I will. And if you turn out to be a massively parallel serial killer, you won't get a warning shot.


PETEY, WHY DID YOU HIRE TAGON TO COME GET US? WHY NOT RUN THE RESCUE YOURSELF?
The balance of power has shifted a bit.
ARE YOU DONE PLAYING GOD, THEN?
Not done, no. The Pa'anuri fired up a core generator of their own.
It's about thirty-five times bigger than mine. Andromeda's core is... substantial.
WOW. I'M GLAD THAT'S NOT MY PROBLEM.
Yet.


LIFE ABOARD THE TOUCH-AND-GO IS ALREADY TRENDING TOWARDS A NEW "NORMAL."
It's not Fair. I didn't even get to see your monkey.
IT'S IN A BETTER PLACE, SERGEANT.
I SWEAR, THAT THING IS LIKE A GIANT CHILD MADE OF
WE KNOW.
THE YOUNGEST CHUNK OF HIM REMEMBERS YOU. IT'S WEIRD HOW THAT MANIFESTS.
THE SAME DANGEROUS BOREDOM ABOUNDS.
THAT WHOLE BATCH OF PROXIMITY FUSES HAD NANNYROT!
SOMEBODY MUST HAVE USED MY COFFEEMAKER TO MAKE COFFEE.
COMFORT ZONES ARE RETURNED TO.
CORPORAL CHISULO, HOLD STILL, OR I WILL GO FISHING FOR THIS BULLET WITH A CATTLE-PROD AND A MELON-BALLER.
SORRY, NORWEST. OUR QUARTERS ARE OFF-LIMITS FOR A LITTLE WHILE.
BUT THERE ARE CHANGES, TOO.
I LIKE IT.


You can't be serious!
YOU'LL *LIKE* HAVING LIPS, ENNESBY. HOW HAVE YOU GOTTEN THIS FAR WITHOUT THE ABILITY TO POUT?
SOME ARE TEMPORARY.
WEIRD. THESE NEW FEET DON'T SMELL LIKE *ANYTHING.*
YOUR BUS WON'T BE READY FOR A FEW DAYS. IF YOU'RE BORED, HELP ME WITH THE DRILLS.


SPECIFICALLY, HELP ME UN-TEACH SCHLOCK PARKATA URBATSU.
NO WAY. HE'S AN ARTIST.
SOME ARE NOT.